

CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE



Definition/Description

Childhood sexual abuse may be defined as: "Any physical contact or any interaction (visual, verbal, or psychological) between a child and an adult when *the child is being used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or any other person*. Sexual abuse may be committed by a person under the age of 18 who is either significantly older than the victim or in a position of power and control." Incest occurs when the abuse happens within the immediate or extended family – father, stepfather, mother, stepmother, brothers or sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc.

Incidence and Other Statistics

- 1 in 3 women will have been sexually abused before the age of 18.
- 1 in 2 women report unwanted sexual contact before the age of 18.
- 1 in 6 men will have been sexually abused before age 18.
- 88% of sexual abuse victims report that the abuser was someone known to them.
- 28% report that the abuser was an immediate or extended family member.
- 12% report being abducted or assaulted by a stranger.

Stages of Abuse

Set-up: The set-up stage begins when the perpetrator begins to win the attentions of the child by giving life-giving tastes of relationship in the form of attention, affection, appropriate touch, gifts, or special privileges. Abusers often begin to secure a promise of secrecy during the set-up stage by allowing the child to participate in activities that the child's parents disapprove of, creating a climate of excitement, or he may threaten that the enjoyed activities will end if others become aware of their *special relationship*. The set-up stage may last for moments, hours or years before the abuse happens and usually will only be recognized by the child or others in retrospect. After the abuse happens, the child will look back on the set-up stage with intense feelings of confusion, ambivalence, and self-hatred.

Betrayal: The second stage of sexual abuse moves from trust to betrayal. Appropriate touch is replaced by touch that is inappropriate. The child's dignity is violated. Choice is denied and the child becomes powerless to stop the abuse.

Securing secrecy: After the abuse occurs, the threat of implied or actual consequences, are used to insure that the secret will not be told, allowing the abuser to continue, sometimes for years. Secrecy may be secured with tenderness or threats, privileges or pain.

Childhood Responses

The amount of trauma a child experiences is unique to each child, his developmental stage, personality, and the quality of his supportive relationships. Factors that increase the amount of trauma the child experiences include:

- The degree to which the parent/child bond is damaged.
- The length of time the secret is kept.
- The frequency and severity of the abuse.

Children who are abused feel:

Confused	Betrayed
Afraid	Ambivalent
Powerless	Hopeless
Ashamed	Guilty
Unlovable	Sad
Bad	Lonely
Angry	Afraid to trust
Depressed	Different from other kids
Alone	Unworthy of protection

The abused child learns ways to survive, to protect herself and keep her world intact using the only resources available to her – her own perceptions, strengths, and abilities. Her concepts about life and relationships (with herself, others and God) form around what she believes to be true about the abuse. A young child is egocentric by nature and believes that the abuse happened because of something she did or because of who she is.

Once she has decided at some core level that the problem is her, she will set out on a course to change herself in order to keep the intolerable pain at bay. She may become a people pleaser, begin to act out, withdraw, control: any strategy that works.

Adult (victims of childhood sexual abuse) Responses

Minimize the abuse and/or deny or minimize the damage	PTSD
Have difficulty trusting people and/or God	Anger
Set boundaries that are too rigid or too loose	Need to control or
Intrusive memories, flashbacks, or nightmares	Out of control
Feel crazy	Eating disorders
Low self-esteem	Sexual dysfunction
Perfectionism	Self-harm/suicide
Somatic complaints with no known medical cause	Substance abuse
Difficulty establishing and maintaining relationships	Depression

Women often seek help when one or more of the above symptoms affect their ability to enjoy physical, emotional, or spiritual health and/or their relationships.

Responding to Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Do . . .

1. Recognize the honor a person gives you if he or she chooses to tell you that he or she was sexually abused. In telling you, the person is deciding that you are a safe person. Never underestimate the courage it takes to say, "I was sexually abused," for the first time. To drag to the light what has been a well-kept secret for decades is terrifying.
2. Realize that the sexual abuse of a child has deep and enduring consequences. This is especially true when the abuser was a family member, the child was very young, and the abuse has been kept secret for a long time.
3. Be willing to witness great pain. You will see great pain, hard questions, and anger. Many of us are uncomfortable with such things and want to make them go away.
4. Be willing to believe the unbelievable. Sitting with an incest survivor brings you face-to-face with some of the most evil and twisted things human beings can do to each other.
5. Examine your own attitudes before God. Coming alongside a survivor of sexual abuse forces you to face your own preconceptions about sexual abuse, pain, good and evil, justice and injustice, males and females.
6. Assist the survivor in seeking professional help. The consequences of sexual abuse are complex. Help him or her find someone who has expertise in this area.
7. Find others who will help you form a support network for the survivor. A group of safe, loving people is better for the survivor and for you.
8. If the survivor is married, help the spouse find support and assistance in understanding the issues.
9. If the survivor is single, he or she may need a place to stay at times. Being alone with tormenting memories and nightmares is frightening.
10. Understand that dealing with memories of trauma almost always results in nightmares. A survivor can go through months and months of night terrors. Having someone to call in the middle of the night from a support network or through a crisis hot line is helpful.
11. Find out whether the survivor has a drug or alcohol problem.
12. Take any suicide threat seriously. Notify the counselor or take the survivor to a medical facility if he or she is threatening suicide.
13. Remember that incest is a criminal act.
14. Understand that healing takes time. God has created us to live in time, and we heal in time. Healing from sexual abuse is not a quick process. It shatters many fundamental things. Our God is a God of redemption, but usually works through people over time. Be patient. Then be patient some more.
15. Be aware of your vocabulary, your timing, and your body language. When we sit with someone in great pain, words of hope and peace are often our first response. Don't rush in. Listen. Words of love and hope will begin to make sense only as they are fleshed out in a relationship with you. I prayed earnestly for a woman I was working with years ago, asking God to show her how much he loved her. His answer: "You show her. You want her to know how much I love her? Then you demonstrate that love to her."
16. Be prepared for repetition. The survivor will need to tell the story many times. Your reassurances, your faith and your hope will need repetition. You will need to speak truth again and again. The lies are strong.

Don't...

1. Don't think that sexual abuse does not occur in seemingly 'good' families. It happens in pastors' homes, choir directors' homes, and 'upstanding citizens' ' homes.
2. Don't minimize what happened. Saying 'At least you weren't killed' does not help the survivor. All sexual abuse is serious, even if the abuse occurred only once or if it never went beyond fondling. All sexual abuse is a violation of God's law.
3. Don't imply that the survivor is to blame for the abuse. Nothing is justification for abuse.
4. Don't excuse the abuser. Whatever the abuser's problems, they are never a mandate for abuse.
5. Don't react with visible shock, horror, or disgust.
6. Don't be afraid of anger and grief. Such feelings will be intense. If there is no emotion with the telling, then the survivor is probably still denying the impact.
7. Don't simply tell the survivor that he or she must forgive and forget. To tell the survivor to forget is ludicrous. The truth needs to be faced before the survivor will even know what needs forgiving. Forgiveness is the work of the Spirit of God, not a switch we flip on. A survivor can ask God to teach him or her to forgive the evil of abuse. No survivor can just produce forgiveness. It is supernatural to forgive.
8. Don't think the survivor simply wants attention. Sexual abuse is shattering. The survivor needs attention, and you are right to give it. Love the survivor. Then love some more. And when you run out of love, get on your knees and plead with God to fill you with more of his love so you can go and love some more."

*~Diane Mandt Langberg
On the Threshold of Hope*
