



# About sexual abuse

## What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse is any sexual experience which is imposed on another. It can take many forms.

Usually sexual abuse involves obvious things like fondling, sexual kissing, oral sex or rape. Sometimes it is less obvious, such as when an adult shows a child pornography, 'talks dirty', or deliberately shows their sexual parts to a child for their own sexual pleasure. Some adults get excitement by watching a child undressing or by holding the child on their lap and rubbing against them.

Often sexual abuse is disguised as a game, as part of bathing or hygiene, or as affection. This can be confusing for both children and adults. But kissing, hugging, holding and stroking your child to show affection or give comfort is not sexual abuse. Touching, bathing and playing are some of the things children need from adults. What makes sexual abuse different is that it is not done to meet the child's needs, but to excite and gratify the adult.

Sometimes adults argue that children enjoy sexual contact and so there is nothing wrong with it. But even if a child's body responds to sexual touching, it does not mean the child wanted the abuse. Children naturally seek affection and attention, and if this is wrapped up with abuse they may 'go back for more'. But children and young people cannot truly agree to sex with adults. They do not have the emotional maturity to choose to

have sex, or to cope with it. The adult is **always** responsible for the abuse.

## **How common is sexual abuse?**

Sexual abuse is far more common than most people think. It is thought that up to one in three people have had some sexual contact imposed on them by the time they are 18.

Most abuse is carried out by adults who are known and trusted by the child. These can be family members, neighbours, playleaders, teachers, and so on. Sometimes children are abused by strangers. Most sexual abuse is carried out by men, but women and older children sometimes abuse too. All sorts of people may abuse children, including 'normal' and 'respectable' members of the community.

We have only recently realised how common sexual abuse is. Many children have been abused for years without anyone knowing and helping them.

## **Why don't children tell?**

Often children are afraid to tell anyone that they are being abused. Perhaps they have been told that what is happening is normal and okay. They may have been told it is a 'special secret'. They may feel great loyalty to a person they love who is abusing them. Or that person may carry a lot of authority in their life.

Some children are threatened, or told that the abuse is their fault and they will be punished if it is found out. Often children cope by putting the abuse out of their minds. Some people completely forget having been abused until something in their adult life reminds them of it.

Children can be very good at keeping the secret, and there is often little outward sign that there is anything wrong. Adults can help children by making sure they know it's okay to talk about things which are frightening them or making them unhappy. They can also sensitively teach children about when touching is okay and not okay, and about good and bad secrets. In the same way that they learn about the dangers of roads, water, fire and so on, children can learn this sort of thing without needing to be upset and frightened.

## **How does sexual abuse affect people?**

When a child is sexually abused they are having something very damaging done to them. If the abuse is discovered and stopped, and the child is supported, she or he may get over the experience quite quickly. But for many children sexual abuse is devastating. It steals their security, their trust in other people and their self-esteem. It can also set up many problems for them in later life.

Many adults who were abused as children suffer from a whole range of problems. This is not because there is something 'wrong' with them. Because they have suffered a trauma, it is quite natural that this should affect them. Sometimes sexual abuse leaves adults with lasting anxiety, panic attacks, nightmares and fears. Some people suffer terrifying experiences such as 'flashbacks' (reliving some of a traumatic event). For some, sexual abuse leaves them with shame, self-hatred and depression. The betrayal of trust they suffered as a child may make it hard for them to feel safe and easy in relationships as an adult. Some people cope with the painful feelings by overuse of drink or drugs. Others may overeat or starve themselves, or hurt their own bodies to express the terrible pain and confusion they feel.

## **What can help?**

Although childhood sexual abuse can be devastating, it is possible to get over its effects. Many people say that the most important thing in helping them to do this has been to talk about what has happened to them. Talking to others breaks the secrecy and helps to let out the hurt and shame.

Friends, family and partners can be very supportive helpers. If someone you know tells you they have been sexually abused, you can help by listening, believing them, and showing you take seriously the pain they have suffered. You may also need to reassure them that you do not blame them or feel disgusted about what happened to them as a child.

Some people find it helpful to talk to a counsellor, or to share support in a group with others who have had similar experiences. You can find out about the help there is by ringing a helpline. Most areas now have Rape Crisis helplines, which are for people abused as children as well as in adult life. Some useful numbers are:

**Bristol Crisis Service for Women 0117 925 1119** (Friday and Saturday, 9pm - 12.30am; Sunday 6pm - 9pm)

Some additional resources in Bristol are:

**Avon Sexual Abuse Centre 0117 935 1707** (Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays 9.30am - 2.30pm)

**Men As Survivors' Helpline 0117 9077 100** (Thursday, 7pm to 9pm)

For details of local rape crisis helplines contact:

**Rape Crisis Federation 0115 9003560**

**Bristol Crisis Service for Women  
PO Box 654  
Bristol BS99 1XH  
0117 925 1119**

**[www.users.zetnet.co.uk/bcsw/](http://www.users.zetnet.co.uk/bcsw/)**

Registered charity 1092299

