

# Child Abuse Awareness & Prevention

## Yes & No's

**SHOULD I TALK TO MY CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE?** Yes . . . break the chain of silence. Talking about sexual child abuse is uncomfortable and difficult. Undoubtedly you have already given your children "Safety tips" . . . how to cross streets, lock doors, etc. Information about sexual abuse can be presented as a precaution without creating unnecessary fears. To continue to "hope" our children will not need to know about this is allowing them to be caught unaware.

**WHAT DOES SEXUAL ABUSE MEAN?** Sexual abuse should not be confused with physical contacts between an adult and a child that are fond or playful expressions of love. Sexual abuse is quite different. It is the use of a child for the sexual gratification of an adult. Children may be the victims of sexual mistreatment, indecent exposure, peeping toms, obscene phone calls, or oral stimulation and sexual intercourse.

**WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE?** It affects boys and girls of all ages, and unfortunately it is not as uncommon as we would like to believe. One out of every four girls and one out of every eight boys under 18 have reported incidents of sexual abuse. While parents may warn their child of dangers and aggressive strangers, the fact is that in 85 % of reported cases of sexual abuse, the offender is known to the child as a relative, a friend of the family or a neighbor. You should be concerned because parents may think of sexual abuse as one isolated incident that happens suddenly. This does happen, but MORE OFTEN it is part of a situation that develops gradually and may occur over and over again before it is detected. You should be concerned because parents may think of sexual abuse as a violent attack on a child, when in fact it is more frequently the result of tricks and subtle coercion such as: I'll let you stay up late if you . . . I'll let you go to the movie if you... Do you want to play a fun game... You need to take off your clothes...

**MOST OFFENDERS OF SEXUAL ABUSE ARE STRANGERS:** No. In most cases of sexual abuse, the offender is someone known and trusted by the child and family. The offender is frequently a relative, neighbor, friend or baby-sitter.

**SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN MOST OFTEN OCCURS IN POOR NEIGHBORHOODS AND AMONG UNEDUCATED PEOPLE:** No. Offenders come from all walks of life: The wealthy and the poor, employed and unemployed, married and single, young and old, educated and uneducated, male and female. Offenders and victims are usually of the same race.

**GIRLS ARE THE VICTIMS:** No. Boys are abused nearly as often as girls.

**OFFENDERS ARE ALWAYS MEN:** No. They can be men or women of any age. Older children or teenagers can also be offenders.

**CHILDREN IMAGINE SEXUAL EXPERIENCES AND MAKE UP STORIES ABOUT**

**THEM:** No. The temptation is to deny a child's story of sexual abuse, to think that the child's story is exaggeration, misunderstanding, or even fantasy. Believe the child. Children do not imagine sexual experiences unless they have had them.

**CHILDREN SEEK OUT SEXUAL ACTIVITY:** Children may imitate adults, but they do not seek sexual activity. It is the adult who misinterprets the child. Adults are responsible for their own behavior.

**NICE CHILDREN ALWAYS ALLOW "LOVING" RELATIVES AND FRIENDS TO TOUCH**

**THEM:** No. Children should be taught that their bodies are private and belong to them. They should not feel guilty or be bribed into allowing someone to bother them or to touch them in ways that make them feel bad. We need to let children know that everyone, including every child, has the right to say "no" to advances, even if the person is a friend or family member

**SIGNALS OF CHILD ABUSE:** Child tells stories of sexual nature.. Child reports sexual activity.. Child has a sudden fear of strangers, a relative or sitter..Child suddenly becomes unruly and destructive, shy or withdrawn.. Irritable, cranky, short-tempered behavior..Change in behavior at school or with friends.. Child may act out feelings, run away, skip school, be rebellious..Child needs more reassurance than usual, clinging to parent..Sleep disturbances: (nightmares, fear of going to bed, wanting light on, waking up during night, fear of sleeping alone)..Pain, itching, discharge, swelling, bruises or bleeding; child may walk differently.. Child's clothing appears stained, torn or bloody..**Please note that the above mentioned signals are only indications of abuse.**

**WHAT TO TEACH YOUR CHILDREN: Parents can learn the extent of the problem of child sexual abuse and then let their children know that:**

Not all adults care about children's feelings..Children can say no even to adults when frightened or confused by them..Children have the right to the privacy of their own bodies..Teach children they have the right to refuse demands for physical closeness if it makes them feel uncomfortable. Assure them it is all right to say NO even to close friends and relatives..Teach children to distinguish between good touches, bad touches and those confusing touches..Caution children against playing alone in isolated places..Children can tell a trusted adult if they are touched in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable..Tell your children how to reach you in case of emergencies..Take time to play the "What if" game (a pretend game) with your children.

**HOW DO CHILDREN REACT TO SEXUAL ABUSE:** Children's reactions differ with their ages and personalities, and the nature of the offense. Sometimes, they seem not to be upset; often they are frightened or confused by sexual assault, especially if committed by a cousin, sibling, uncle/aunt, parent, step-parent or grandparent. The child may be afraid to tell for fear of punishment, of blame, or of disbelief. The child may not want to "make problems" for the offender. Older children are often too embarrassed to tell anyone.

**EFFECTS ON THE VICTIM:** A child who experiences sexual assault need not be damaged permanently. With proper emotional support, the effect of the incident can be dealt with properly. Take advantage of counseling in your community. Believe your child's story. Don't deny the problem or blame the child. Stay calm. Intense emotions will frighten the child. A quiet, unhurried conversation conveys calmness. Never punish the child. Sexual abuse is the fault of the abuser. Assure your child that you still love him/her, regardless of what has happened. Tell the child he/she is safe and will not be harmed.

Although sexual abuse is a crime, do not take the law into your own hands. **Get help immediately!**

**IMPORTANT:** YOUR CHILD SHOULD BE AWARE THAT HEALTHY SEXUALITY IS DIFFERENT FROM SEXUAL ABUSE. BE PREPARED TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS.

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