

## Overview

### What is child sexual abuse?

A person sexually abuses a child when he or she exposes the child to sexual acts or behavior. Child sexual abuse can involve (Finkelhor, Hammer, & Sedlak, 2008):

- Sex acts that involve penetration
- Touching the child's breasts or genitals
- Making a child touch the perpetrator's breasts or genitals
- Voyeurism (that is, when a perpetrator looks at a child's naked body)
- Exhibitionism (that is, when a perpetrator shows a child his or her naked body)

In addition, other forms of child sexual abuse may include the following:

- Showing a child pornography or using a child in the production of pornography (Putnam, 2003).
- Child sexual exploitation, such as trafficking or child prostitution
- Internet-based child sexual abuse, such as creating, depicting, and/or distributing sexual images of children online; or stalking, grooming, and/or engaging in sexually explicit behaviors with children online

Children who have been sexually abused may also experience verbal, emotional, or physical abuse (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, Hamby, & Kracke, 2009). Perpetrators may use force or, more commonly, manipulation (e.g., threatening to harm a child's family or pets, telling the child that no one will believe him or her) to abuse a child and keep him or her from telling others. Child sexual abuse is a crime and an abuse of trust, power, and authority that may contribute to serious short- and long-term problems for the child.

### Who are the victims of child sexual abuse?

**Gender:** Both boys and girls are vulnerable to child sexual abuse. Research has shown that girls are abused three times more often than boys, whereas boys are more likely to die or be seriously injured by their abuse (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996).

**Age:** Children of all ages, from birth to age 17, may be sexually abused. In a recent survey, adolescents ages 14 to 17 were by far the most likely to be sexually victimized; nearly one in six adolescents (16.3 percent) was sexually victimized in the past year, and more than one in four (27.3 percent) had been sexually victimized during their lifetimes (Finkelhor et al., 2009).



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## Who are the perpetrators of child sexual abuse?

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**Gender:** Based on law enforcement reports, 96 percent of people who sexually abused a child were male (Snyder, 2000).

**Age:** Most perpetrators are adults. Law enforcement reports showed, 76.8 percent of those who perpetrated sexual assaults were adults; 23.2 percent were juvenile people who sexually abuse children with 19.5 percent of perpetrators between the age of 12-17 (Snyder, 2000).

**Relationship to the child:** Children are most often sexually abused by people with whom they are acquainted. Family members were the perpetrators of 34 percent of law enforcement reports against juveniles (Snyder, 2000).

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## How common is child sexual abuse?

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- In a year, about one in 12 children are sexually abused (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005).
- Overall, 6.1 percent of all children surveyed had been sexually victimized in the past year and nearly one in 10 (9.8 percent) over their lifetimes (Finkelhor et al., 2009).
- About one in three girls and one in seven boys will be sexually abused before the age of 17 (Briere & Elliott, 2003).

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## What are the warning signs that a child may be sexually abused?

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- Evidence shows that child sexual abuse is not always obvious and many children do not report that they have been abused (Finkelhor et al., 2008). Many children are embarrassed or feel guilty. Some fear the consequences of a disclosure and the ramifications it will have

on the family and the people who sexually abuse children. Children often love and trust the people who sexually abuse them, creating further barriers and complications in coming forward. They may feel confused because of the ways in which their bodies may have reacted to the abuse. Victims may also have a fear that there is something wrong with them or that they caused the abuse.

A child may show any or none of the following warning signs if he or she is being abused (Jensen, 2005):

- Bodily signs (e.g., bed-wetting, stomachaches, headaches, sore genitals).
- Emotional signs (e.g., fear, sadness, mood changes, acting out, refusing to be left alone with certain people).
- Sexual signs (e.g., inappropriate sexual behavior with objects or other children).
- Verbal signs (e.g., voicing knowledge about sexuality that is not age- or developmentally appropriate).

These indicators may be cause for further attention and concern on the part of parents, caregivers, teachers, and others involved in children's lives.

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## Risk factors for the perpetration of child sexual abuse

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Over the past 20 years, researchers have identified six categories of risk factors for the perpetration of child sexual abuse. These categories include (Whitaker et al., 2008):

1. Family risk factors (history of abuse, poor family functioning including more harsh discipline, and poor family attachment/bonding)

2. Externalizing behaviors (aggression/violence, anger/hostility, substance abuse, non-violent criminality, paranoia/mistrust)
3. Internalizing behaviors (history of mental illness, anxiety and low self-esteem)
4. Social deficits (low social skills, loneliness, difficulties with intimate relationships)
5. Sexual problems (deviant sexual interest)
6. Cognitions/attitudes tolerant of adult child sex and minimizing the perpetrator's culpability

People who sexually abuse children demonstrated substantial differences from non-offenders in all six categories.

### How can I reduce the risk of children being abused?

#### Strategies for parents and concerned community members

- Develop positive, open communication with children: talk to them about their day, friends, feelings, concerns, etc. When they talk to you, listen and be supportive.
- Model and teach about healthy relationships. Help children to create and express boundaries about being touched.
- Teach children about healthy sexual development.
- Teach children that secrets about touching and being touched are not safe secrets to keep.
- Help children to identify adults they trust whom they can confide in.
- Monitor children's internet use. Talk to them about the dangers of internet predators.
- If a child or adolescent exhibits inappropriate sexual behavior, talk with a professional to assess the need for help.



- Support child abuse prevention programs in schools and other community settings.
- Educate yourself about child sexual abuse. Share what you learn with other adults.
- If you suspect a child is being abused, contact the police or your local child protective services agency, the ChildHelp National Child Abuse Hotline, at 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453) or local sexual violence program.

#### Resources

##### Child Welfare Information Gateway:

<http://www.childwelfare.gov>

**Stop It Now!:** <http://www.stopitnow.org>

##### National Center for Missing and Exploited Children:

<http://www.missingkids.com>

##### National Sexual Violence Resource Center:

<http://www.nsvrc.org>

##### The Hero Project – A Pennsylvania Coalition

**Against Rape project:** <http://www.hero-project.org>

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This overview was compiled by Emily Dworkin, with contributions from Hallie Martyniuk, and is part of a *Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Information Packet*. Contact the National Sexual Violence Resource Center for more information: <http://www.nsvrc.org> or 877-739-3895.

