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#ItsYourBusiness

# Understanding and preventing child sexual abuse

## What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse is sexual activity with a child by an adult, adolescent, or older child. Sexual abuse can include both touching and non-touching behaviors. If any adult engages in sexual activity with a child, that is sexual abuse. It can include touching and non-touching behaviors. Examples of child sexual abuse can include, but are not limited to: rape or incest, sex trafficking, molestation, creation of or exposure to child abuse images, voyeurism or exhibitionism, sextortion, or online exploitation.[1]

Around the world, child sexual abuse is a serious crime. In the U.S., every state and territory has laws against and criminal penalties for perpetrating child sexual abuse.

## How big is the problem of child sexual abuse?




[1] National Child Traumatic Stress Network definition

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## How does child sexual abuse affect children?

The violation of child sexual abuse causes children to lose their sense of safety and trust in the world, and harms their relationships. Left untreated, the trauma of childhood sexual abuse can lead to:

- Mental health problems like depression, anxiety and PTSD symptoms;
- Behavioral changes like substance use disorders, risky sexual behaviors, or increased risk for violence against oneself and others; and/or
- Physical health problems like infections, injuries, or even heart disease or diabetes later in life.[2]

## What are some signs of child sexual abuse?

1. Changes in behavior. This could include concerning changes in eating, sleeping, or school performance.
2. Changes in mood (sad, withdrawn, no longer wants to participate in activities they previously enjoyed).
3. Returning to earlier behaviors like bedwetting, thumb-sucking, and others.
4. Suddenly avoiding specific people or places where abuse may have occurred.
5. Risk-taking behaviors such as substance abuse, binge-drinking, self-harm or physically lashing out at others.
6. Inappropriate sexual behaviors. While most children who have experienced child sexual abuse do not in turn sexually abuse other children, some do. And, some youth who have been sexually abused become sexually risk-taking as a way to try to regain control over their bodies.

These behaviors are not always caused by child sexual abuse. They can be symptoms of other forms of trauma as well. However, if you notice that a child is experiencing any of these, it is important to ask the child about how they are feeling and what is wrong.



One of the most common ways for a parent or other trusted adult to find out about child sexual abuse is by a child disclosing abuse about themselves or one of their friends or classmates. This is why it is so important for parents to talk to their children about child sexual abuse so that the children know they can come to their parents for help.

**The single most important thing that you can do if a child discloses to you is to believe the child and let them know you are going to get help.**

[2] CDC Fast Facts: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse.

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## What can I do if I suspect child sexual abuse?

Whether you have children or not, whether you work in a role that serves children or simply where they might be present, you are a critical backstop in protecting kids at home, work, and in the community.

1. **Listen.** When abuse is disclosed to you or you hear about an experience that sounds like abuse, listen calmly, non-judgmentally and collect facts. A good, open, trusting relationship with a child you care about may be the difference between stopping abuse and allowing it to continue.
2. **Ask questions.** Not only of the child, but of other trusted adults with knowledge of the situation. Have they noticed any red flags? Remember that grooming is something perpetrators do not only to children, but also to community members, to gain trust and access to the child.
3. **Report your suspicions.** Contact law enforcement or child protective services to report the suspected abuse. Remember, you don't have to know for certain that it occurred—only that you suspect it did. Professionals can look further into it and help.

## How do I report suspected abuse?

To report abuse in the US:
Contact local law enforcement or child protective services.

In the US, the CHILDHELP National Child Abuse Hotline at **1-800-4-A-CHILD** (1-800-422-4453) is available 24/7 to help you make a report.

Outside the US:
Contact local law enforcement.



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## How can victims of child sexual abuse heal?

Evidence-based treatments (EBTs) for trauma are very effective in reducing trauma systems and helping children live normal, healthy lives. Children's Advocacy Centers and similar community institutions around the world provide these treatments to children who have experienced child sexual abuse, reducing and healing the impacts of trauma from abuse. Studies show that these EBTs can reduce trauma symptoms: 3 out of 4 children with PTSD who received treatment no longer had PTSD at their last follow-up appointment. Even problem behaviors get better after treatment.[3]

Evidence-based treatments (EBTs) for trauma from abuse include:

- Trauma-Focused, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)
- Child and Family Traumatic Stress Intervention (CFTSI)
- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

In short, children get better with help. If your child needs help in the US, find the nearest Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) by searching the online directory at www.nationalchildrensalliance.org.

## How can I get counseling or help for my child?

In the US: Contact your local Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) for more information and referrals to evidence-based treatment.

A nationwide directory of CACs is available at **www.nationalchildrensalliance.org.**



# How do CACs help kids?

Watch our explainer video and learn what they do and how you can help us support them.




Scan or visit
nationalchildrensalliance.org

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