

Child Sexual Abuse

What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse is a sexual offense against a child, such as rape, sodomy, engaging a child in a sexual activity, or engaging a child in – or promoting a child’s – sexual performance.

Touching offenses:

- Fondling
- Touching sexual organs
- Making a child touch an adult sexually
- Attempted or actual sexual intercourse
- Rape

Sexual exploitation:

- Child pornography
- Child prostitution
- Sex rings (this involves one or more adults who abuse children in small groups)
- Ritualistic abuse (sexual abuse as part of a ceremony)

Recognizing sexual abuse

Symptoms of sexual abuse may include physical and behavioral signs. Many children who are sexually abused never exhibit any physical signs. Behavioral signs are more common.

Physical indicators of child sexual abuse:

- Difficulty walking or sitting
- Torn, stained or bloody underclothing
- Pain or itching in the genital area
- Bruises or bleeding in the genital, vaginal or anal area
- Venereal disease
- Pregnancy

Behavioral indicators of child sexual abuse:

- Unwillingness to change for, or participate in, gym class
- Withdrawal from family, school, or friends
- Reverting to more childish or infantile behavior
- Bizarre, sophisticated or unusual sexual behavior or knowledge
- Reports of sexual abuse

Reacting to sexual abuse

In some cases, a child will disclose that he or she has been sexually abused. If a child discloses abuse, try to stay calm and, above all else, believe the child. Children rarely lie about sexual abuse. Here are some other things you should do:

- Allow the child to talk, but don't press. Don't ask the child to repeat the details over and over.
- Praise the child for telling you.
- Reassure the child that he or she is not to blame.
- Show love and respect for the child.
- Protect the child immediately from the suspected offender.

Reporting sexual abuse

If the abuse was by someone in the child's family or household, make a report to the New York State Child Abuse Reporting Hotline at 1-800-342-3720. If you are a mandated reporter, call 1-800-635-1522. The hotline will notify the local Child Protective Services (CPS), who will investigate and take needed action to protect the child.

If the abuse was by someone outside of the family and household, report to the local or state police or sheriff's department.

Myths and facts about child molesters

Knowing who child molesters may be and how they operate can help keep children safe.

The myths: Don't be fooled into thinking all child molesters are:

- Strangers or "dirty old men"
- Homosexuals
- Mentally disabled
- Lurking in alleys, parks and schoolyards
- Drug or alcohol abusers

The facts: A child molester is usually:

- A trusted adult or older teen, often a close friend or family member.
- Someone with access to children, such as a babysitter, neighbor or coach.
- A skillful manipulator, willing to use any trick he or she can, including lavish attention, gifts, force, guilt, lies about the child's family, threats to the child's family, or using child victims to "recruit" new victims.

Most adults are not molesters. Don't teach children to mistrust adults. Teach them about safety and staying alert to unusual adult behavior.