**Child Sexual Abuse Information Sheet for Parents**

**What is Child Sexual Abuse?**

Child sexual abuse is often defined as contacts or interactions between a child and an adult in which the child is used for the sexual gratification of the offender or another person. Sexual abuse may also be committed by a person under the age of 18 when the person is either significantly older than the child or is in a position of power or control over that child. Most often, sexual abuse involves some direct physical contact – e.g., sexualized touching and/or kissing; fondling, rubbing, and/or penetration of the vagina or anus with the fingers; oral sex; and simulated intercourse or penile penetration of the vagina or anus. Some sex offenders gratify themselves by exhibiting their genitals to a child or by observing or filming a child removing his or her own clothes.

Children are often engaged in these sexually abusive activities by playful coaxing (e.g., “this will be our special secret…”) or bribed with offers of money, candy, and favors. Sometimes they are bullied or threatened. On some less frequent occasions, physical force or violence may be used. It is important to remember that whether or not the child is actually “hurt”, whether or not the child objects, and whether or not the child likes it, such sexual engagement by an adult or a coercive or older child is considered to be sexual abuse.

**What are the consequences when children experience sexual abuse?**

Children who have endured sexual abuse may experience a wide range of emotional and/or behavioral reactions to the abuse. The nature and severity of these difficulties may depend upon the age of the child, the identity of the offender, the circumstances of the abuse, and the family’s reaction to the child’s disclosure. Children may exhibit symptoms indicative of anxiety and distress, such as wetting the bed, withdrawn or acting-out behavior, nightmares, difficulty in school, and running away. These difficulties are similar to the problems exhibited by children who have experienced any kind of trauma. Children may also exhibit symptoms that are more specific to sexual abuse, such as a repetitive sexual talk and play, age-inappropriate sexual behavior, and fears of specific situations or people that remind them of the abuse. Additionally, some children do not exhibit any apparent difficulties as a result of their traumatic experience.

Once the abuse has been disclosed and stopped, some children return to relatively normal behavior and emotions. The support and protection of the people close to them are very important in helping them get back to normal. However, some children have symptoms that persist long after the abuse itself has ended. In fact, a significant number of children who have experienced sexual abuse exhibit posttraumatic stress symptoms. That’s why it’s important for a child who has experienced sexual abuse to receive a psychological evaluation and, if necessary, treatment.

**What kind of treatment is available for children who have experienced sexual abuse?**

Many therapy formats have been used to help children overcome the effects of sexual abuse. These include indifividual, family, and group therapy formats. The therapy techniques used have been derived from a wide range of psychological theories, including psychodynamic, behavioral, cognitive, insight-oriented, and structural and strategic theories of family therapy. There has been only limited research regarding the effectiveness of these varying approaches in assisting children to deal with the difficulties they experience as a result of sexual abuse. However, there is considerable research indicating that cognitive-behavioral therapy, applied in both individual and group settings, effectively decreases the problems experienced in the aftermath of sexual abuse.

Cognitive-behavioral interventions have been successful in helping children who have been sexually abused as well as their nonoffending caregivers. The cognitive-behavioral therapist may help nonoffending parents cope with their own thoughts and feelings about their children’s abuse. At the same time, they teach parenting skills that help parents respond more effectively to their child’s disclosures and abuse-related difficulties. Cognitive-behavioral interventions are individually tailored to target the particular child’s difficulties and include educational, coping skills, and processing exercises. Processing exercises encourage children to confront memories, thoughts, and everyday reminders (e.g., bathrooms, sleeping alone, undressing, showering) of the abuse in a graduated fashion over time. Discussion, doll play, drawing, reading, writing, poetry, singing, etc., may be used in the process. By reducing the anxiety associated with abuse-related discussion, these therapy activities help children who have experienced sexual abuse to express their thoughts and feelings more openly, thereby enhancing their understanding and emotional processing of the abusive experience(s).

Finally, it is important for parents to know that the research in the field of child sexual abuse has repeatedly demonstrated that the most important factor influencing children’s psychological adjustment following sexual abuse is the degree of support they receive from parents and other caregivers. With strong emotional support from caring adults and effective medical and mental health intervention, children who have experienced sexual abuse can look forward to healthy, satisfying, and fulfilling futures.

**Who is sexually abused?**

Child sexual abuse cuts across all social classes and racial and religious groups. Both boys and girls are victimized, and it is not a very rare occurrence. Our best estimates suggest that, by the age of 18, one of every four females and one of seven males have been subjected to some form of contact sexual abuse.

**Who sexually abuses children**

Although a small percentage of sex offenders are women, the majority are male. Sex offenders are generally no “dirty old men” or strangers lurking in alleys. They usually are not obviously mentally ill or retarded. In fact, sex offenders are often well known and trusted by the children they abuse. Offenders are often family members (e.g., cousin, uncle, parent, stepparent, grandparent) or individuals who are unrelated but well known to the child (e.g., a neighbor, coach, babysitter). There is no clear-cut description or profile of sex offender, and there is no way to recognize a potential abuser. For this reason, it is often hard to believe that a trusted individual would be capable of sexually abusing children.

Some offenders have been sexually abused themselves as children. Others have suffered other forms of abuse and neglect in childhood. Some may be unable to function sexually with adult partners and may have many different encounters with children. Others are able to maintain sexual relationships with adults, but may turn to children for gratification during times of stress. A small percentage of offenders sexually abuse children while the offender is under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

**Why does sexual abuse occur?**

Although the question as to why child sexual abuse occurs is frequently asked by children and their caretakers, there is no simple answer. The main point to remember is that children and adolescents who have experienced sexual abuse and their nonoffending parents are not to blame. The responsibility for sexual abuse rests squarely on the shoulders of the sex offender, regardless of the problems which may have contributed to his/her abusive behavior.

Our society is generally uncomfortable with sexuality and has made limited efforts to prevent child sexual abuse; these attitudes may also be responsible for keeping the problem hidden for so long. For this reason, it is essential that we communicate our concerns about child sexual abuse clearly and openly. As a society, we must become more aware of the seriousness and prevalence of the problem, and we must increase our present efforts to address this problem worldwide.

**Why don’t children tell us what’s happening?**

Child sexual abuse is, by its very nature, secretive. It almost always occurs when a child is alone with an offender. In order for the sexual activity to continue, offenders rely on the children to keep the secret. There may be direct threats of physical harm to the children to keep the secret. There may be direct threats of physical harm to the children and/or to their pets, family members, etc., if they tell. Often children are led to believe that the abuse is their own fault and that they will be blamed, rejected, or disbelieved if they tell. They feel embarrassed, ashamed, and fearful about the abuse as well as the secrecy. In fact, many children who have experienced sexual abuse grow to adulthood without ever telling anyone because they fear rejection, punishment, and retaliation.

**When should you suspect child sexual abuse?**

Because of the secretive nature and wide range of behavioral reactions of children, child sexual abuse is a difficult problem to detect. Children who have been sexually abused, however, are most often identified as a result of their own accidental or purposeful disclosures. Some children accidentally reveal their abuse by exhibiting adult – like sexual behaviors or by sharing sexual knowledge that is beyond their years. Some children may make a vague disclosure or tell a friend who then tells an adult. Parents should be aware of a sudden changes in behavior: nightmares, withdrawal, and avoidance of particular persons, places, or things, unusual aggressiveness, jumpiness, and/or inappropriate sexual behavior. These behaviors may suggest the presence of a wide range of possible traumatic difficulties that need to be explored.

Children’s reactions to the person who abuses them are quite varied. One cannot determine if sexual abuse is occurring by observing the child and alleged offender together. Some children are fearful and/or avoid their offenders; others talk very negatively about the offender but behave positively to him/her. Still others remain very attached and loving to an offending parent or caretaker. Whether they are positive, negative, or ambivalent, the child’s feelings toward the offender should be accepted. Children need to know that none of their feelings is wrong.

Teaching your child personal safety skills and maintaining open lines of communication within the family may increase the likelihood that your child would disclose sexual abuse and/or other traumatic childhood experiences, if experienced.

**How can you reduce a child’s risk of sexual victimization?**

It is important to maintain open lines of communication with children, in general. Specifically, children should receive age-appropriate sex education as well as information about sexual abuse. Just as we teach our children about fire prevention, we also need to teach them about child sexual abuse. Children should be taught, in a matter-of-fact way, that their bodies belong to them and that they have the right to say “no” to a “not OK” touch. They need to be taught that they can tell an adult about any touching that makes them feel uncomfortable or that they think is “not OK”. In addition, children and adolescents can be taught how to make safe decisions about where they go and what they do when there is no parental or adult supervision.

It is important to remember, however, that it may be extremely difficult for a child or an adolescent to stop, or tell about, sexual abuse. Therefore, a child or adolescent should never be blamed for not stopping the abuse from happening or for waiting a while before telling about it. Many children never tell, and most children don’t tell right away.

It is also important to remember that parents cannot watch and supervise their children all the time. Thus, no matter what you do, you may be unable to ensure that your child is never sexually abused. As a nonabusive parent you should not blame yourself if your child is sexually abused. Instead, it is most helpful to devote your energy to obtaining needed services to your child.

**How should you respond if you suspect child sexual abuse?**

It’s natural for parents to feel quite distressed upon discovering that their child may have been sexually abused. However, the most important action to take as a parent is to try to remain calm. Children, including adolescents, are very sensitive to parental emotional reactions, and if they see or feel how upset or angry you are, they may be very frightened and “clam up”. You want to convey to your child that it’s good that he/she has told you. If you can’t question your child calmly by yourself, it is better wait for help from a professional. Be careful not to say anything that sounds like you blame him/her, and be sure to emphasize that the abuse is not his or her fault. Some children report that the sexual contact felt good. This does not mean that the child is, in any way, to blame or that the child should feel guilty for having enjoyed the sexual interaction and/or the offender’s attention. Sometimes children who have been victimized may even initiate sexual behavior with other adults. However, it is always the adult’s responsibility to set appropriate limits.

Don’t encourage your child to “forget about it” and shut off the conversation. On the other hand, it’s not helpful to push the child beyond what she/he is ready to say. Just be open to whatever your child can tell you and to any questions he/she may ask. Try to understand that the child may have mixed feelings about the offender and what has happened. Although you may feel like keeping your child at your side continually for protection, it’s important that you not be overly restrictive and that you help your family return to as normal a routine as possible. It’s also important not to be afraid to show your child your normal expressions of affection and physical closeness. Sometimes this is difficult, especially for nonabusive fathers. But you don’t want to give the child the impression that your feelings about him/her have changed because of what has happened.

Children who may have been sexually abused should undergo a specialized physical examination that includes the genital area. Although children may feel hurt by sexual abuse, their bodies usually remain unchanged. Well-trained physicians can reassure children that their bodies are OK.

**Where should you go for help?**

Anyone who suspects that a child has been sexually abused should contact the child protection agency in his/her state. Most states have a 24-hour toll free number for this purpose. You may remain anonymous, but the caseworker will ask you important questions about the child, the possible offender, and the circumstances. The agency will most likely investigate the sexual abuse allegations and provide guidance and help to the child and family.