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NEW JERSEY CARES INSTITUTE

The Art & Science of Healing Children

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE INFORMATION SHEET

WHAT?

- 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 that 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. Sometimes a sex offender might gratify himself just by exposing himself (exhibiting his 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 Jane…") 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 child sexual abuse

- What are the consequences of sexual abuse for the child victim?

  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 Children may exhibit symptoms indicative of anxiety and distress such as wetting the bed, withdrawn or acting behavior, nightmares, difficulty in school, and running away.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 which are more specific to sexual abuse such as repetitive sexual talk and play, age-inappropriate sexual behavior, and fears of specific situations or people which remind them of the abuse. Additionally, there are some children who may not exhibit any apparent difficulties as a result of their traumatic experience.

  Once the abuse is disclosed and stopped, some children return to relatively normal behavior and emotions. The support and protection of the people close to them is very important in helping children get back to normal. However, some children have

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symptoms that persist long after the abuse itself has ended. In fact, a significant number of children who have experienced sexual abuse exhibit post-traumatic stress symptoms. That's why it's important for a child who has experienced sexual abuse to receive a psychological evaluation and treatment if necessary.

- What kind of treatment is available for victims and nonoffending parents?

Many therapy formats have been used to help children overcome sexual abuse. These include individual, 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 parent(s). 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 will help parents respond more effectively to their children's disclosures and abuse-related difficulties. Cognitive behavioral interventions for the child are individually tailored to target the particular child's difficulties. However, educational, coping skills and gradual exposure exercises are usually included within the treatment plan. Gradual exposure refers to exercises that encourage children to confront memories, thoughts and everyday reminders (e.g. bathrooms, sleeping alone, undressing, showering, etc.) of the abuse in a gradual fashion over time. This may be accomplished through a variety of means including discussion, doll play, drawing, reading, writing, poetry, singing, etc. By reducing the anxiety associated with abuse-related discussion, gradual exposure exercises help children who have experienced sexual abuse to express their thoughts and feelings more openly. This process increases their ability to better understand and emotionally process 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 single 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?

- Who is the victim of child sexual abuse?

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Child sexual abuse cuts across all social classes, 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 are subject 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 NOT "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 most often a family member(e.g. cousin, uncle, parent, step parent, grandparent) or an individual who is unrelated, but well known to the child (e.g. a neighbor, coach, babysitter, etc.). There is no clear cut description or profile of a 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 percent of offenders sexually abuse children while under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

WHY

- 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 thing to remember is that child and adolescent victims 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

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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 itself and about the secrecy. In fact, many children who have experienced sexual abuse grow to adulthood without ever telling because they fear rejection, punishment or retaliation.

WHEN?

- 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 sudden changes in behavior: nightmares, withdrawal, and avoidance of particular persons, places or things, unusual aggressiveness, jumpiness and/or inappropriate sexual behavior. Such behaviors may suggest psychological difficulties like sexual abuse that may 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 or 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 towards the offender should be accepted. Children need to know that none of their feelings are wrong.

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

HOW?

- 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 okay" touch. They need to be taught that they can tell an adult about any touching which makes them feel uncomfortable or which they think is a "not okay". In addition, children and

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adolescents may be taught about making safe decisions about where they go and what they do when they are without 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 the abuse**.** 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 you child is never sexually abused. Therefore, as a non-abusive parent you should not blame yourself if your child is sexually abused. Instead, it is most helpful to devote your energy to obtaining the needed services for 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 thing to do 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 and 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 to 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 this 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 he/she is ready to say. Just be open to whatever your child can tell you and to any question. 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 non-abusive 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 have specialized physical examination. This includes a genital examination. Although children may feel hurt by sexual abuse, their bodies usually remain unchanged. Well-trained physicians can reassure children that their bodies are okay.

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WHERE?

- Where should you go for help?

  Anyone who suspects that a child has been sexually abused should contact the child protection agency in their state. Most states have a special, 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.

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