



PREVENTING

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE



Sexual abuse of children is more common than most people realize. Some surveys say that at least one out of five women and one out of 10 men recall sexual abuse in childhood.

As a teacher or caregiver, you play an important role in education and prevention.

What is child sexual abuse?

The American Academy of Pediatrics defines child sexual abuse as any sexual act with a child that is performed by an adult or an older child. Such acts include fondling the child's genitals, getting the child to fondle an adult's genitals, mouth to genital contact, rubbing an adult's genitals on the child, or actually penetrating the child's vagina or anus.

Other, often overlooked, forms of abuse occur. These include an adult showing his or her genitals to a child, showing the child obscene pictures or videotapes, or using the child to make obscene materials.

Children are most often abused by people they know. According to the pediatrics academy, the child knows the offender in 8 out of 10 reported cases. The offender is often an authority figure whom the child trusts or loves. Almost always the child is convinced to engage in sex by means of persuasion, bribes, or threats.

Prevention in your facility

Child care facilities and schools are often mentioned as places where child abuse can occur. For the safety of children—and to avoid allegations—get training. Invite a qualified mental health expert to give workshops to staff. Assign staff to research child sexual abuse, using resources such as those listed at the end of this article.

Review regulatory guidelines on hiring staff and doing background checks. Most adults who sexually abuse children have a mental disorder called pedophilia. The typical pedophile is male, but women have also sexually abused children.

Encourage a climate of openness and respect among staff. Supervise new employees in the spirit of learning and sharing about classroom problems. Discuss appropriate touching in diapering, toilet learning, and undressing or dressing a child. Be alert to attempts to isolate a child.

Educating parents and children

Educate parents about preventing sexual abuse. Make it the topic of your next parents' meeting or newsletter. Explain the safeguards in your facility, and encourage parents to drop in unexpectedly at any time.

In parent conferences, discuss why it's important to teach children about their bodies. Ask how you can work together to help children learn the names

of all body parts. Suggest that toileting and bathing provide opportunities for teaching preschoolers that some parts are private. Discuss parents' views on modesty, learning about sex, and the difference between good touch and bad touch.

Help parents learn how to listen to their children. Encourage them to be patient when it seems hard for a child to talk about something. Encourage them to accept their child's fears and calmly discuss scary experiences.

Remind parents that while children must feel free to speak out about any attempt to molest them, the responsibility for protecting children belongs to adults. Parents must supervise their children and be careful in selecting people their children spend time with.

While children are in your care, provide a positive role model. Children need adults who give them positive, nurturing reinforcement of their own worth. You're in a unique position to be such a model. Your behavior and actions are constantly seen by children and provide a basis for learning.

Learning to recognize sexual abuse

Ideally, we want to prevent sexual abuse from ever occurring. In some cases, however, the most we can do is recognize it and prevent it from happening again.

Child sexual abuse

Physical indicators

- headaches, stomachaches, and overall not feeling well
- pain in anal or genital area
- recurring vaginal or bladder infections
- sexually transmitted disease
- oral, genital, or anal bleeding
- redness, swelling, itching, or trauma to the genital or anal area

Behavioral indicators

- sudden change in behavior
- regression to more childish behavior
- striking, exceptional fear of a person or certain places
- drawings that are scary or use a lot of black and red
- disturbed sleeping patterns
- changes in relationships to adults (avoidance or clinging)
- depression, low self-esteem
- discomfort or extreme sensitivity to physical contact
- unreasonable fear of a physical exam
- discomfort about undressing in front of peers
- inappropriate and obsessive sexual awareness
- attempts to get other children to perform sexual acts

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PEOPLE THEY KNOW

CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION IS A **COMMUNITY ISSUE**

- **Observe children.** Learn the indicators of child abuse and neglect. (See box on page 25.) Be alert to changes in children's behaviors and their relationships with peers. Sometimes it's hard to determine what is different, but if it doesn't seem right, it usually isn't.
- **Listen to children.** In some cases, abused children tell friends about the abuse. A child who is told about or sees abuse in another child may tell an adult. A child's first statements about abuse may be sketchy and incomplete. They may only hint about the problem.

Many children who report abuse are not believed. When a plea is ignored, the child may not risk telling again. As a result, the child could be victimized for months or years.

Help children understand that abuse—even sexual abuse—is never their fault. Avoid displays of rage. When adults get angry at another person or the situation, children often misinterpret it as "You're mad with me." Give the child lots of comfort and support: "You were so wise and brave to tell me about this." This is most important if the child has been abused by a relative or family friend.

- **Report suspicions of abuse.** If abuse is life-threatening, call 9-11. Otherwise, call the state child abuse hotline. A doctor helps decide whether sexual abuse has taken place. When a child is not physically abused and the abuser is a family member, a caseworker may handle the case. When a child is abused by a non-family member, the police usually handle the matter.

What happens next depends on the circumstances. If safety is an issue, the child may be removed from the home. The offender or the entire family may be required to attend a treatment program. In some cases, the offender may face criminal charges. In any event, the child and family will need a great deal of support from relatives and friends.

Prevention in the community

In addition to your individual work with staff and families, learn about prevention efforts and services for abused children in your area. Connect with others who share your concern. See resources on page 27.

Child abuse prevention is a community issue. As an advocate, you can make a difference in children's lives and demonstrate that there are adults who care.

HELP CHILDREN UNDERSTAND THAT THE ABUSE IS NEVER THEIR FAULT

References and resources

Child Sexual Abuse, www.nlm.nih.gov/medline-plus/childsexualabuse.html

This Web site, Medline Plus, is a service of the U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health. It offers links to a number of resources, including information from the American Academy of Pediatrics on what sexual abuse is and how to recognize it.

Greater Texas Community Partners, www.gtcp.org

This nonprofit, volunteer organization works to meet the needs of abused and neglected children by building partnerships between volunteers and state and local governments. Volunteers provide caseworkers with items needed by children, such as clothing, baby formula, and school supplies. Volunteers also connect caseworkers with churches, businesses, and individuals that can offer resources and moral support.

Texas CASA, www.texascasa.org

CASA, Court Appointed Special Advocates, is an organization of trained volunteers who serve as advocates of abused children and provide detailed information to judges to safeguard children's best interests and ensure they are placed in safe, permanent homes as quickly as possible.

How to report sexual abuse in Texas

Your observations of a child or parent may lead you to suspect child abuse. As a teacher or staff member, you are required by law to make a report.

Call the Texas Child Abuse Hotline at 1 (800) 252-5400. Calls are answered 24 hours a day, seven days a week. All calls are confidential.