



## Fact Sheet: About the sexual abuse of children

'Child sexual abuse is a crime. Child sexual abuse is when an adult or someone bigger than the child uses his or her authority or power over the child, or takes advantage of the child's trust and respect, to involve the child in sexual activity.'

Child sexual abuse doesn't just mean sexual intercourse although it is involved. Child sexual abuse involves a range of sexual activity include touching a child on their breasts or penis, masturbating in front of children, flashing or oral sex. The offender often uses tricks, bribes, threats, guilt and sometimes physical force to make the child take part and to stop the child from telling anyone about it.' (New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People, 2009)

### How prevalent is child sexual abuse?

- Somewhere between one in four and one in three girls and one in six and one in nine boys will experience childhood sexual abuse. (Fergusson & Mullen, 1999; NSW Commission for Children & Young People, 2009)
- Childhood sexual abuse is perpetrated predominantly by adult males from all walks of life. This includes heterosexual men abusing boys and girls, their own and other people's children (NSW Commission for Children & Young People, 2009).
- In 85% of child sexual abuse cases, the child knows the offender. Most child sexual abuse is perpetrated in the home of the child (NSW Commission for Children & Young People, 2009).

### What are the causes of child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse is never anyone's fault but the offender. It is perpetrated against children and young people of all ages and in families from all backgrounds, religions and economic situations.

Sexual abuse is associated with discriminatory attitudes to women and sex that men learn from a young age, as well as unique power relationships between men and women and adults and children.

### What do we know about perpetrators?

As with adult sexual assault the overwhelming majority of perpetrators of child sexual abuse are male. They:

- Are usually very ordinary looking people from any background including well-respected positions in society;
- Are often related to the child or are a family friend;
- Are always very careful to ensure that they are not suspected of child sexual abuse;
- Prey on a child, and also on those people around the child;
- May work to undermine the child's reputation so that the child won't be believed.

### What are the effects of child sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse is harmful to children. Children may experience a range of emotional, psychological and physical problems and trauma as a result of being sexually abused. The longer the abuse goes on, the more serious are the effects.

Sexually abused children are more likely than other children to:

- Have poor self esteem;
- Have difficulty making and keeping friends;
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- Have difficulty trusting others;
- Be self-destructive or aggressive;
- Abuse drugs and alcohol;
- Develop mental health problems;
- Engage in personal risk behaviour;
- Be confused about their identity, their worth, and their sexuality;
- Experience difficulties in learning and concentrating at school;
- Have exceedingly high expectations about themselves;
- Have difficulty in identifying and expressing their needs.

### **How can sexual abuse be recognised?**

Child sexual abuse is not usually identified through physical indicators. Often the first sign is when a child talks about the abuse to someone they trust. However the presence of sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy or vaginal or anal bleeding or discharge may indicate sexual abuse.

### **Is it OK to talk to children about sexual abuse?**

Knowing about sexual abuse may help to keep children safe from it. When adults talk openly with children about sexual abuse and what to do if they are in a threatening situation, then they give the child permission to tell.

Families can help by encouraging a loving environment where children are able to talk openly about their feelings and know they will be taken seriously.

Stress to children that if someone touches them in a sexual way, it is not their fault and that they should tell someone they trust about it.

### **References and resources**

Australian Childhood Foundation (<http://www.childhood.org.au/>)

NSW Commission for Children & Young People (<http://www.kids.new.gov.au>)

Rosebank Child Sexual Assault service (<http://www.rosebankcsa.org.au>)

Centres Against Sexual Assault (<http://www.casa.org.au>)