

PARENT INFORMATION ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE

Here is some practical information for helping you keep your child safe from sexual abuse. If you have specific questions or concerns about your children, please contact your school principal or counselor. Other resources are listed at the end of this information.

Did you know?

- That every two minutes a child is sexually assaulted
- There are often no physical signs of sexual assault
- By staying silent the abuser is protected
- Silence gives permission for the victimization to continue
- That one in four girls and one in six boys are victims of sexual abuse by age 18
- Sexual abuse doesn't discriminate...it spans all socio-economic classes and religions
- That 50-90% of child sexual assaults are never reported
- In 1998, Health and Human Services reported 108,360 confirmed sexual abuse cases
- 61% of reported rapes were committed against victims under age 17
- 85% of the time, the child knows and trusts the abuser.

What is Sexual Abuse?

Sexual abuse includes the following acts or omissions by a person:

- Sexual conduct harmful to a child's mental, emotional or physical welfare, including conduct that constitutes the offense of indecency with a child, sexual assault, or aggravated sexual assault;
- Failure to make a reasonable effort to prevent sexual conduct harmful to a child;
- Compelling or encouraging the child to engage in sexual conduct;
- Causing, permitting, encouraging, engaging in, or allowing the photographing, filming, or depicting of the child if the person knew or should have known that the resulting photograph, film, or depiction of the child is obscene or pornographic;
- Causing, permitting, encouraging, engaging in, or allowing a sexual performance by a child. TEXAS FAMILY CODE §261.001

Over 98,000 children in America are treated just for sexual abuse - and those are only the ones that are reported. The number of cases not reported is by far greater- because kids are afraid to tell anyone what's happened to them...and legally validating the abuse is difficult at best. It's usually a best kept secret!

The long-term and emotional and psychological damage of sexual abuse can be devastating to a child. The abuse must be identified and stopped immediately - and the child must receive professional help at once.

Child sexual abuse can take place in the family—by a parent, step-parent, sibling, or other relative. It's almost always by someone your child knows...friend, neighbor, childcare giver, teacher...yet at times can be a stranger.

When sexual abuse occurs, a child can develop various distressing feelings, thoughts and behaviors. No child is ever psychologically prepared to cope with repeated sexual abuse. An infant or toddler will develop problems resulting from the inability to cope with the abuse.

The child who knows and loves the abuser becomes trapped between affection or loyalty for that person, and the sense that the sexual activities are terribly wrong.

If the child tries to break away from the sexual relationship, the abuser may threaten the child with violence death or loss of love. When sexual abuse occurs in a family, the child may fear the anger, jealousy or shame of other family members, or be afraid the family will break up if the secret is told.

Any child who is the victim of prolonged sexual abuse usually develops low self-esteem, feels worthless and has an abnormal or distorted view of sex. He or she may become withdrawn, mistrust adults, and can become suicidal.

Some children who've been sexually abused have difficulty relating to others—except on sexual terms. Some sexually abused kids will continue the pattern by becoming sexual abusers or prostitutes, or have other serious problems when they reach adulthood.

What are some signs of sexual abuse?

- Physical indicators of sexual abuse
 - Difficult in sitting or walking.
 - Report pain when urinating or defecating, or complain of stomachaches.
 - Report pain or itching in the genital area of a discharge
- Sexually transmitted disease and pregnancy
 - Other physical indicators of sexual abuse include symptoms of sexually transmitted disease (STD) as well as pregnancy. STD and pregnancy are by themselves indicators that a child is sexually active; they do not by themselves establish abuse or assault. In a preteen child, abuse is strongly indicated by STD (except that infants may contract some STDs from their mothers at birth). In a teenager, further information is needed about the circumstances and the child's sexual partner, who might have been another minor about the same age, an older minor, or an adult. The sexual contact may have been assaultive or may otherwise qualify as "sexual conduct harmful to a child." Reasonable suspicions of this nature must be reported and may be investigated, depending on circumstances.
- Specific Behavioral indicators of sexual abuse
 - Frequent expressions (verbal references, pictures, pretend games) of sexual activity between adults and children
 - Knowledge about sexual relations beyond what is probable for their age.
 - Masturbating inappropriately or compulsively
 - Behavior may be sexually suggestive, inappropriate, or promiscuous; or conversely
 - Showing infantile behavior or extreme fear of being alone with adults of a particular sex.

- Sexual victimization of other children
- Symptoms of Emotional injury
 - Psychological impacts like withdrawal, depression, sleeping and eating disorders, self-mutilation, phobias, and psychosomatic symptoms such as stomachaches and headaches.
 - School problems such as frequent absence of a sudden drop in grades
 - Poor hygiene or excessive bathing
 - Older children may abuse alcohol or drugs, run away, or adopt other self-destructive behaviors including suicide threats or attempts
 - Any or all of these behaviors can arise from causes other than sexual abuse; however, in context any one of them could be taken as a warning that some form of harmful sexual conduct has occurred or is still occurring.

What are some signs of sexual abuse by age?

- Children up to age 3 may exhibit:
 - Fear or excessive crying
 - Vomiting
 - Feeding problems
 - Bowel problems
 - Sleep disturbances
 - Failure to thrive
- Children ages 2 to 9 may exhibit:
 - Fear of particular people, places or activities
 - Regression to earlier behaviors such as bed wetting or stranger anxiety
 - Victimization of others
 - Excessive masturbation
 - Feelings of shame or guilt
 - Nightmares or sleep disturbances
 - Withdrawal from family or friends
 - Fear of attack recurring
 - Eating disturbances
- Symptoms of sexual abuse in older children and adolescents include:
 - Depression
 - Nightmares
 - Poor school performance
 - Promiscuity
 - Substance abuse
 - Aggression
 - Running away from home
 - Fear of attack recurring
 - Eating disturbances
 - Early pregnancy or marriage
 - Suicidal gestures
 - Anger about being forced into situation beyond ones control
 - Pseudo-mature behaviors

What should I do to help my child who has been sexually abused?

- When kids report they are or have been sexually abused, most often they're telling the truth. False accusations by children represent less than 5 percent of all reports
- Do not panic
- Calmly listen to your child and ask what happened
- Do not criticize your child
- Let your child know that you will protect them
- Do not confront the abuser
- Notify the police and child protective services
- Get your child medical and psychological help from those trained experts who deal with sexual abuse
- Reinforce to your child how much you love them.

Tips for Parents

- Develop close communications with your kids. Let them know they can tell or talk to you about anything
- Make a rule that there should be no secrets kept from you. Secrets can be dangerous. Encourage your child to tell a trusted adult if they are hurt or worried. Teach your child about the parts of the body and sexuality. Abusers agree that a curious child's lack of information makes him/her easy prey.
- Stress that sexual advances from adults or older children are wrong and illegal
- Emphasize that children have a right to body privacy and self-ownership
- Instill in all children a sense of self worth and dignity at every opportunity
- Make a commitment to spend plenty of time with your children. A lonely and attention starved child makes an easy target.
- Make it a priority to know your children's friends and their families
- Listen to your instincts. If a situation or person makes you uncomfortable, trust your feelings
- Teach your child to trust their feelings and pay attention to what they tell you
- If you have questions about your child's sexual development talk to your child's doctor or teacher. They may be able to help you make sense of whatever is causing concern
- Psychologists or child psychiatrists may also be sources of help
- When looking for advice or services related to questions about your child's sexuality, be sure to ask whether or not the qualified professional has any training regarding child development and sexual abuse. If not, as a professional.

Preventing Sexual Abuse

- If a child is taught what's "okay" and what's "not okay" and they are self-confident, they are less apt to fall victim to the wiles of a sexual predator and more likely to report an incident should one occur. Several steps can be taken to protect your child from sexual abuse. Educate your children about their bodies, and what constitutes sexual abuse.
- Telling children that "if someone tries to touch your body and do things that make you feel funny, say NO to that person and tell me right away"

- Teaching children that respect does not mean blind obedience to adults and to authority, for example, don't tell children to, "Always do everything the teacher or baby-sitter tells you to do"
- Encouraging professional prevention programs in your local school system

Teach your child:

- A healthy touch (for example—a quick hug or kiss on the cheek from a loved one)
- A confusing touch (for example—aggressive tickling and brushing up against parts of your body)
- A bad touch (for example—fondling genitals or sexual intercourse)
- Tell your children that it is never OK for adults, older adolescents, or even for any kid to act sexually suggestive in front of them, and it is NEVER OK for adults or anyone else to have sex with them.

Educate your children in advance about what abusers may tell them, such as:

- "This is our little secret,"
- "You are special, and I only do this with very special children,"
- "If you ever tell anyone, I'll have to track them down and kill them,"
- "If you tell anyone, I'll have to kill myself,"
- "You like this too, and you're as responsible for this as I am,"
- "You'll only worry your parents needlessly if you tell them,"
- "It will break your mother's heart if she knows you agreed to do this,"
- "You didn't complain about this the first time we did it..."

If your child says they have been sexually abused:

- If your child is sexually abused, the most important thing that you can do is BELIEVE YOUR CHILD
- STAY CALM and REASSURE your child he/she did nothing wrong. Abuse is never a child's fault
- LISTEN to your child. Be careful not to make comments and judgments about the abuser. Usually, the child knows or loves the person who abused them
- MAKE SURE YOUR CHILD IS SAFE from further abuse
- GET HELP for both your child and yourself as soon as possible

General reporting requirements in the state of Texas

- The law requires that any person, who believes that a child is being abused, neglected or exploited report the circumstances to the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services Abuse Hotline, 1-800-252-5400. (You do not need to have proof, only to believe it is happening).
- The person making a report is immune from civil or criminal liability if the report is made in good faith. The name of the person making the report is confidential.
- Any person suspecting abuse and not reporting it can be liable for a Class B misdemeanor.

Pursuant to TEXAS EDUCATION CODE 38.0041, the District shall implement a policy to increase parent awareness of issues regarding sexual abuse.

Resources used for this handout:

Texas Education Agency, Prevention of Child Abuse Overview,
<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index.aspx?id=2820>, (last visited Aug. 5, 2009).

Child Welfare Information Gateway, <http://www.childwelfare.gov/index.cfm>, (last visited Aug. 5, 2009).

Texas Association Against Sexual Assault, *Child Sexual Abuse*,
<http://www.taasa.org/csa/default.php>, (last visited Aug. 5, 2009).

American Humane, Child Sexual Abuse, Fact Sheet, <http://www.americanhumane.org/about-us/newsroom/fact-sheets/child-sexual-abuse.html>, (last visited Aug. 5, 2009).

KeepKidsHealthy.com, Child Abuse,
http://www.keepkidshealthy.com/welcome/commonproblems/child_abuse.html, (last visited Aug. 5, 2009).

Office of the Attorney General of Texas, What Can We do About Child Abuse?,
http://www.oag.state.tx.us/AG_Publications/txts/child_abuse.shtml, (last visited Aug. 5, 2009).

Department of Family Protective Services, Children First: Safe and Secure,
<http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/itsuptoyou/pdfs/SexualAbuseTalk.pdf>, (last visited Aug. 5, 2009).

Love Our Children USA, Keeping Children Safe Strengthening Families, Sexual Abuse...The Hidden Abuse...The Hidden Crime!, <http://www.loveourchildrenusa.org/sexualabuse.php>, (last visited Aug. 5, 2009).