



Child Sexual Abuse Information

Definition

Child sexual abuse is the improper exposure of a child to sexual contact, activity, or behaviour. This includes all forms of sexual contact, such as forced oral contact ("kissing"), fondling, grabbing, oral-genital contact ("oral sex"), vaginal penetration and anal penetration. Showing a child sexually explicit material (pornography) and genitalia (e.g. flashing) is also sexual abuse.

Age of Consent

The age of consent in Canada is 16. This means that no one under 16 can consent to sexual contact with an adult, and no child under the age of 12 can consent to sexual contact with anyone. Canadian consent laws also state that no one under 18 can consent to sexual contact with anyone who is in a position of power, trust or authority over them¹.

Close-in-Age Exemption

The "Age of Consent" laws include a "Close in Age" clause for 14 and 15-year-olds. This means that people who are 14 or 15 can legally have sexual contact with someone up to five years older than them. For example, a 14-year-old can have sexual contact with someone who is up to 19 and a 15-year-old can have sexual contact with someone who is up to 20.

Peer Experimentation

Canadian consent laws also include exemptions for youth who are 12 or 13. People who are this age can have sexual contact with someone who is up to 2 years older than them. This means that a 12-year-old can have sexual contact with someone up to 14 and a 13-year-old can have sexual contact with someone up to 15.

Prevalence

It is hard to know how many children across Canada experience abuse because much of the abuse goes unreported, and each province collects its information differently. Still, research done across the provinces indicates that between 1 in 2 to 1 in 3 girls will experience sexual abuse before they are 18. For boys, this number is between 1 in 3 to 1 in 6.²

For Caregivers

Only 30% of children who experience sexual abuse tell someone about what's happening before they reach adulthood.³ An important role any caregiver has is creating a safe, trusting environment for children to disclose.

The following are some suggestions on what to discuss with children to build a relationship of safety and trust for children:

Help children recognize and identify their feelings.

Generally, adults approve of children when they share their happy and positive feelings, but discourage children from expressing when they're sad, lonely or angry. When children are encouraged to share all feelings, they know they are in a safe, warm, comforting environment. They know they can talk about the "bad" things in their life as much as they can talk about the good things. This way, when a child

feels sad, confused, afraid or ashamed because of abuse, they will be able to share the appropriate feelings without being afraid of getting into trouble.

Teach children the difference between secrets and surprises.

Children who are abused often live in a world of secrets. Offenders may tell children that what's happening is a "secret," which keeps what is happening hidden. One way to teach children the difference between secrets and surprises is by explaining that surprises are fun because the child gets to share them with other people. Some examples of surprises are birthday parties or special presents. Secrets, however, are what children aren't allowed to tell anyone. Adults should never ask children to keep secrets they aren't allowed to tell, and there should never be any secrets about touching.

Talk to children about abuse.

Sometimes children who are abused don't tell anyone about what's happening because they're not sure it's wrong. This may be because they don't know that adults they trust can hurt them, or because the offender has convinced them that what's happening is their fault. Other times, the touch itself feels physically good and emotionally "bad," which can confuse children. Therefore, it's a good idea to teach children the difference between positive physical touch (hugs and kisses from parents and grandparents, a doctor checking their body with their permission, a pat on the back from a friend) and inappropriate physical touch (touch involving a child or adult's penis, vagina, buttocks, or breasts). When having this discussion, clarify that children who are abused do nothing wrong. Sometimes, children who are abused think that they are bad or "ruined" because something "bad" happened to them, which reinforces shame.

Teach children that they have a right to say no.

95% of children who are abused know their offender.⁴ They often have a hard time speaking out because young children are taught to obey orders from adults and are often punished for questioning authority. Teaching children that they have a right to speak up against a person who is in a position of power, trust or authority teaches them that no one has the right to hurt them and increases the chances of them telling a trusted adult about abuse if it happens. Note that "the right to say no" is different than "must say no." Sometimes, children who are abused don't use the word "no" - this may be because they're afraid, because they don't know they can say "no", etc. Regardless of what the child does or doesn't do, the only person responsible for the abuse is the offender. Explain to children who have been abused that the abuse is not their fault, even if they didn't say "no."

Work with your children to list the safe adults in their lives.

When children are abused, it is usually by someone they know, love and trust. Also, children often try telling more than one adult (more than one time) before their disclosure is taken seriously or believed. This is why it is important to talk with children about who they trust. Avoid simply telling them who to trust because your ideas of who they should confide in are likely different than theirs. Discuss that sometimes, people we trust can hurt us, and that this

doesn't mean we can't trust anyone. Sometimes, people we love may not give us the support we need. When this happens, we can go to someone else until we are taken seriously.

Teach children the proper names for their genitals.

When teaching children "eyes", "ears", "knees", and "nose", also teach them "breasts", "vagina", "buttocks", and "penis". When children who are abused know the proper names for their genitals, and the genitals of the person who abused them, they have a powerful tool: the language to talk about what happened.

Teach children how to use emergency phone numbers. In Edmonton, the number is 911, and it is free to call from cell phones and phone booths. Province wide "0" will access emergency services. The operator will want to know what help is needed (ambulance, police, fire) and the name, address, and telephone number of the person calling. Teach children to give their address first and give the rest of the information if there is enough time.

Respect the child's privacy

Possible indications of sexual abuse:

There are few signs which indicate, without a doubt, that a child has experienced sexual abuse. However, there are many signs that children may have experienced some type of trauma, including sexual abuse.

The key is to look for several signs which are happening at the same time (clusters) or sudden changes in behaviour. All children are different, which means that some show their feelings with aggression while others may cover their feelings and try to act normal. Hints or vague suggestions from a child should be taken seriously. These indirect actions or comments may be the child's way of disclosing.

Possible indications of sexual abuse include:

- ~ Sleeping problems, nightmares, refusal to stay in their own bed or bedroom
- ~ Regression to an earlier stage of development (i.e. thumb-sucking, bed wetting, etc.)
- ~ Withdrawal, unhappiness, anxiety, excessive crying, or loss of appetite
- ~ Fear of a particular family member, fear of being left alone with a particular person, or with someone of a particular gender
- ~ Fear of being touched, shrinking away from physical contact
- ~ Yeast infections, sexual transmitted infections, or soreness in the genital areas
- ~ Sexual knowledge that seems age inappropriate

Responding to Disclosures

Listen

- ~ Do not interrupt the child.

The Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton is a non-profit organization funded by the United Way of Edmonton and Area, Family and Community Support Services (FCSS), Alberta Provincial Government, service clubs, foundations, and public donations.

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24 hour crisis line: 780/423-4121 www.sace.ab.ca

- ~ Let the child speak and say what's on their mind.
- ~ Let the child talk about their feelings (even the "bad" ones).
- ~ Stay calm. Showing shock, disgust or anger may make the child think they did something wrong, or that they are "wrong" and "disgusting." It may also shut down the disclosure.
- ~ Do not probe for details - this may re-traumatize the child and interfere with future police investigations.

Believe

- ~ Tell children you believe them.
- ~ While some people think children lie about abuse, this is not true. They do not have the language or the knowledge to make up stories about sexual abuse.

Support

- ~ Tell children they did the right thing by telling.
- ~ Do not make promises you can't keep (such as, "we'll make sure you never have to see that person again," or "that person will go to jail").
- ~ Tell them you will work with them to get the help they need.

Respect the child's privacy

- ~ Avoid talking about the abuse in front of others.
- ~ Don't promise to keep the disclosure a secret.

Report

- ~ In Alberta, all adults over 18 are legally obligated to report any suspected cases of child abuse, including sexual abuse, to either Alberta Children and Youth Services or the police.
- ~ To make a report, call the Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-387-KIDS (5437) (24 hours, toll free).
- ~ To report to the police, call your local police station or go in person and make a report with the officer on duty.
- ~ Before reporting, write down the details you know so you don't forget anything. When making the report, note the date and time you called, the person you spoke with, and what you discussed.

Take care of yourself

- ~ It is extremely difficult to receive a disclosure about child sexual abuse. Recognize that a child disclosing to you speaks to the trust and safety they find in their relationship with you.
- ~ Children who disclose to you need to know that you can emotionally cope with the disclosure. Taking care of yourself will directly benefit the child.
- ~ Seek support for yourself if you need to do so by doing things you enjoy (such as watching movies, reading, exercising, spending time with friends or loved ones) or by contacting the Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton's 24-Hour Sexual Assault Crisis line (780-423-4121).

Updated June 2009

- 1 Criminal Code of Canada, Section 150.1 (2)
- 2 "Child Sexual Abuse: National Clearinghouse on Family Violence" (Government of Canada, 2006).
- 3 "Child Sexual Abuse: National Clearinghouse on Family Violence" (Government of Canada, 2006).
- 4 Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile (2005).

