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sexually abused?

A YoungMinds Booklet



If you know someone who has been sexually abused, or have been yourself, you might find this booklet helpful. It will look at:

- ✦ What is sexual abuse? (pages 3-4)
- ✦ Who sexually abuses children? (page 4)
- ✦ How someone who has been abused might feel (pages 5-7)
- ✦ How abuse can affect behaviour (pages 8-10)
- ✦ Telling someone else about sexual abuse (pages 11-14)
- ✦ Getting help with how you feel (pages 15-16)
- ✦ How therapy can help (page 17)
- ✦ Sources of help (pages 18-19)



What is sexual abuse?



Sexual abuse can include different kinds of activities such as:

- ✦ Some types of kissing
- ✦ Touching private parts of the body
- ✦ Rape (being forced to have sex when you don't want to)
- ✦ Being made to look at pornographic videos or magazines
- ✦ Other acts which are felt by the child or young person to be abusive



This is not the kind of sex play which is a normal part of growing up, when children and young people want to find out about each other's bodies, or when people start going out with each other.





Sexual abusers are usually stronger or in a position of power or authority over the child or young person. They use this power to get the person to take part in sexual activities.

The law tries to protect the safety and rights of children and young people. When someone sexually abuses a child or young person they are breaking the law.

Who sexually abuses children?



Abusers are not usually strangers. Most often, they are a relative, friend of the family, neighbour, a lodger, baby-sitter, someone at school, or even a group. Sometimes they can be other young people - a brother or sister or one of their friends. They often secretly abuse more than one child. Sexual abuse is usually carried out by men but sometimes women do it too.



How someone who has been abused might feel



Being abused leads to feelings which are hard to cope with, such as feeling:



dirty
 ashamed
 depressed
 worthless
 worried about abusing others
 isolated
 confused
 frightened
 worried about having a boyfriend or girlfriend
 angry
 embarrassed
 suicidal
 anxious
 like running away
 scared about sexuality
 guilty
 lonely





"When I told him not to do it he said 'Don't be silly, it's just a game, what do you mean you don't like it?'. I felt really mixed up. Sometimes he would say 'I'm doing this because I love you...it's our special secret ok?'. I thought maybe it was just me. Maybe I just had the wrong feelings. Maybe all dads are like that and it's just me who's weird."

The person carrying out the abuse may be someone who seems to be very nice in lots of ways. This can make it very hard to accept that they are capable of sexual abuse.

"I know this sounds really stupid now. But I thought that someone who abused people was horrible ALL the time. I didn't think they were nice too, like helping you with your homework or buying you new clothes, normal stuff, so it took a while for the penny to drop."



Some abusers choose to believe that there is nothing wrong in what they are doing. They may claim that those they abuse encourage them. This can cause people who are being abused a lot of confusing feelings, such as that they are to blame if they didn't tell the abuser not to do it, or if they didn't tell anyone. Many abusers rely on the age, inexperience and fear of people they abuse to be able to carry on with it.

"It all started after Dad died. I bottled up my feelings inside because Mum was really gutted. She had to work more shifts to earn enough money. Her brother looked after us in the evenings. That's when it started. He said if I told Mum, she would probably crack up because she's been through so much already."

Adults are responsible for looking after and protecting children and young people. Children are not responsible for protecting adults.



How abuse can affect behaviour

Sexual abuse can also lead to other problems:



- not taking care of yourself
- bad dreams
- not being able to make friends
- eating problems
- poor concentration
- bed-wetting
- running away
- blanking out the memory
- losing your temper
- self-harming
- using alcohol or drugs
- difficulty sleeping



"Before I told anyone, I was scared to go to sleep at night. Even though I tried not to think about what happened, I still had nightmares. I was too tired to bother with school and just wandered around on my own. I felt like an alien, the only one in the world like this, and I couldn't tell anyone.

Everything built up inside. I got into trouble for not doing my work, and ended up chucking a chair at someone. I was told I would be excluded if it happened again. Mum couldn't have coped with that. So I started cutting myself instead."

People often do their best to cope with painful feelings by trying to forget about them. But this doesn't always work.





"I didn't know what to do, because I knew I'd always have to go home and face it. I thought if I could try not to think about it, squash it out of my mind, it could be like it wasn't really happening. But stupid little things would remind me, make me feel horrible inside. My friends drifted away, and I started going round with people who were in trouble. We would walk out of school after registration, go shop-lifting, get drunk and play chicken. Why did I do it? Because for that moment, when I was taking a risk, I knew I wouldn't be thinking about home."

Some people feel that the only way to manage what is happening is to run away from home. If this happens, they are in a lot of danger from people who will take advantage of them. It is easy to become involved in crime or prostitution. If you are feeling like this it is VERY IMPORTANT that you get help.



Telling someone else about sexual abuse

There are three important reasons why it's very important to get help:

- ❖ Stopping the abuse
- ❖ Starting to get over what happened
- ❖ Protecting other children and young people



"I didn't tell anyone about what was going on for about two years. I sort of tried to before that, by dropping hints. I tried telling someone at school by saying 'If someone I knew was being abused and I told you, what would happen?'. They said they'd have to tell social services. No way could I tell - I didn't want my family to break up and it be my fault. In the end I said something, but only because I thought he had started on my cousin."





Telling someone about abuse may be very hard and can feel scary. You may be worried about what will happen if you talk about it, or if anyone will believe you (if they don't, don't give up, try someone else).

Sometimes it can help if you write down what you want to say first. If telling someone you know feels too difficult to begin with, you could try ringing a helpline. They can give very useful advice about any worries you might have (see pages 18-19 for further details).

You don't have to say who you are if you don't want to, and can say as little or as much as you want.



This may be the first step in helping you think about who else can support you. This could be a:

youth worker
teacher
friend
relative
doctor
counsellor
police officer
social worker
school nurse



"When I got through to ChildLine it took a bit of time for me to say anything. They didn't hang up though. Anyway, what was really good was they couldn't see my face so they wouldn't know me if they saw me in the street. They were really patient and helped me say what I wanted in my own time, and helped me decide what to do next. When Social Services and the police got involved they were still there for me when it felt like no-one else was."





You may find that the person that you decide to talk to will want to report the abuse to a social worker who can take steps to see that it stops. They will usually talk with you about this first.

If you have been abused, or someone else thinks you have been, there will be an investigation. This is when people such as a social worker, doctor or police officer try to find out what has happened, so it can be decided what should be done to help and protect you. If you have been in touch with any other agencies, they may be contacted too.

Some people worry that if they have been in trouble with the police before they will also be punished for being abused, but this is not the case. This can be an upsetting time, but remember there are people who can help you through it.

Whatever happens, even if the abuser is taken to court and is convicted, you are not responsible for what happens.



Getting help with how you feel



Telling someone about abuse will not necessarily take away upsetting feelings. There may be times when it might seem better not to have told anyone.

"Loads of times I thought about taking it back, saying it was all lies. I didn't want to believe it myself. I just wanted my family back to normal. I just thought it would be easier to pretend it hadn't happened."

For some people it can be very useful to talk to someone trained in understanding how it feels to have been abused, and how to help. This could be a psychotherapist, psychologist, psychiatrist or counsellor. This does not mean you are mad.



You may want to talk about what has happened to you on your own, or in a group with other young people with similar experiences. Sometimes families find it helpful to talk to a professional together. The kind of therapy offered will depend on what is needed - and wanted.

"It helped being in a group. You know it happens to other people too, but you think you're the only one that feels the way you do. You feel less weird when you find out you're not. It helped me realise it shouldn't be me that feels ashamed, it should be him. You can see it's not other people's fault it happened to them, and they help you see it's not your fault either."



How can therapy help?

Young people who have decided to have some kind of therapy or counselling say that they feel much more positive about life as a result. They feel less depressed and worried, better about themselves and more able to do normal things such as schoolwork.

"Well, they didn't run out of the room in horror when I said about what happened. I wasn't sure how to handle it, so I was talking about it in a jokey way. They looked a bit serious, no sense of humour I thought. In the end it helped though, them being serious helped me take it seriously, and then take what I felt about me seriously. It helped me sort out how I felt and it wasn't so much part of my life. I could manage better at school, and could begin to get on with my life more."



Who can help?

It may help to contact some of these places:

Sexwise

Freephone: 0800 28 29 30
Textphone: 0800 328 1651
Lines are open 7.00am-midnight
7 days a week.
www.ruthinking.co.uk
Offers advice to under 18 year olds about sex, relationships, contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases.



Careline

Helpline:
020 8514 1177
(Mon-Fri, 10.00am-1.00pm
and 7.00pm-10.00pm)
www.carelineuk.org
Confidential crisis telephone counselling for children, young people and adults. Careline can refer callers to other organisations and support groups throughout the country.



NSPCC Child Protection Helpline

Freephone: 0808 800 5000 (24 hours)
Textphone: 0800 056 0566 (24 hours)
Asian Freephone: 0808 096 7719 (24 hours)
CYMRU/Wales Freephone: 0808 100 2524
(Mon-Fri, 10.00am-6.00pm)
Email: help@nspcc.org.uk
www.nspcc.org.uk
A confidential service offering counselling, information and advice for children, young people and families in need.



Get Connected

Freephone: 0808 808
4994 (7 days a week,
1.00pm-11.00pm)
Email:
help@getconnected.org.uk
www.getconnected.org.uk
Finds young people the best help whatever the problem.



Children's Legal Centre

www.childrenslegalcentre.com
This website is designed for young people, carers and parents and contains frequently asked questions on legal issues affecting children.



Samaritans

Helpline: 08457 90 90 90
(24 hours)
Textphone: 08457 90 91 92
(24 hours)
Republic of Ireland 18 50 60 90 90
Or write to: Chris, PO Box 90 90,
Stirling FK8 2SA
Email: jo@samaritans.org
www.samaritans.org
Confidential 24 hour emotional support service for any person in distress, crisis or at risk of suicide.

Youth Access

Signposting Service: 020 8772
9900 (Mon-Fri, 9.00am-1.00pm
and 2.00-5.00pm)
Email: admin@youthaccess.org.uk
www.youthaccess.org.uk
A national membership organisation for youth information, advice and counselling agencies. Provides information on youth agencies to children and their carers but does not provide direct advice.



ChildLine

Freepost NATN1111
London E1 6BR
Freephone: 0800 1111 (24 hours)
Textphone: 0800 400 222
(Mon-Fri, 9.30am-9.30pm.
Weekends, 9.30am-8.00pm)
ChildLine is the UK's free helpline for children and young people. It provides a confidential telephone counselling service for any child with any problem. It comforts, advises and protects.

