

Background of Child Sexual Abuse

Definition of Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is defined as inappropriately exposing or subjecting a child to sexual contact, activity, or behavior. Sexual abuse includes oral, anal, genital, buttocks, and breast contact. It also includes the use of objects for vaginal or anal penetration, fondling, or sexual stimulation. Exploitation of a child for pornographic purposes, making a child available to another as a child prostitute, and stimulating a child with inappropriate solicitation, exhibitionism, and erotic material are also forms of sexual abuse.⁸ Non-contact behaviors, such as voyeurism, indecent exposure, and sexual remarks to children, also constitute sexual abuse.

Scope of Child Sexual Abuse

In 2008, approximately 69,184 children (9.1 percent of all substantiated cases of child maltreatment) in the United States were officially counted as victims of child sexual abuse.⁹ These figures may actually under-represent the number of child sexual abuse victims. One study indicates that at least 12-35 percent of American women and 4-9 percent of American men experienced some form of sexual abuse as children.¹⁰

Nature of Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse occurs in all populations. It happens to children in all socioeconomic and educational levels, across all racial and cultural groups, and in both rural and urban areas. The vast majority of child sexual abusers include someone the child knows such as a parent or other relative, teacher, clergy, neighbor, or friend. Approximately 60 percent of boys and 80 percent of girls who were sexually victimized were abused by someone the child knew.¹¹

Only a fraction of those who commit sexual assault are apprehended and convicted for their crimes. According to Center for Sex Offender Management, only 33.9 percent of sexual assaults against persons 12 years or older were reported to law enforcement.¹² Current research does not track the rate of reporting for child sexual abuse for children younger than 12 years of age.¹³ Most experts, however, assume such rates are similar to those for children older than 12 years of age.¹⁴

Child sexual abuse is perpetrated by juveniles as well as adults. Forty percent of reported sexual assaults against children ages six and under are attributable to juvenile abusers, as are thirty-nine percent of reported sexual assaults against children ages 6 through 11.¹⁵ Adolescent boys make up approximately 23 percent of sexual offenders.¹⁶ Research findings indicate that from 40 to 80 percent of juvenile sex offenders have themselves been victims of sexual abuse.¹⁷

Common warning signs of those who sexually abuse children include excessive talk about the sexual activities of children or teens; excessive masturbation; talk about sexual fantasies including children; encouraging a child to keep secrets; viewing of child pornography; requests to adult partners to dress or act like a child during sexual activity; excessive time spent with children or teens, not with adults; and the identification of children with sexual slang terms.¹⁸ However, sexual offenders often do not display such overt indicators of their sexual abuse of children. Therefore, in addition to being attuned to warning signs, parents and caregivers should routinely employ risk reduction strategies, which minimize, to the extent possible, the child's risk exposure for sexual abuse. Such basic measures as refraining from public display of the child's printed name on the outside of clothing or backpacks, providing parental supervision calibrated to the level of opportunity a given circumstance may present for the occurrence of child sexual abuse, and observing and monitoring relationships the child has with adolescents and adults are routine practices that parents and caregivers can adopt to reduce the child's risk exposure for sexual abuse.

For more information contact Prevent Child Abuse America at 312-663-3520 or at mailbox@preventchildabuse.org.