

Consequences of Child Sexual Abuse

The physical signs of child sexual abuse are often hard to detect, as most perpetrators avoid physically harming their victims so they can repeat the activities over time. Because of this dynamic and the fact that children generally disclose long after the last contact, few children will have diagnostic findings. Child sexual abuse can be very different from rape, where force and restraint are used and signs of injury are generally present.¹⁹

When children are injured as a result of sexual contact, they may present with vaginal or rectal bleeding; genital pain, itching, swelling, or discharge; difficulty with bowel movements; painful urination; and recurring complaints of stomachaches and/or headaches. Few children present with extragenital trauma to the breasts, buttocks, lower abdomen or extremities.²⁰ Children can also contract sexually transmitted diseases or become pregnant as a result of sexual abuse.²¹

Behavioral and emotional consequences/warning signs include: extreme changes in behavior such as loss of appetite, eating disorder, withdrawal, or aggressiveness; disturbed sleep patterns or a sudden fear of the dark; regression to infantile behavior; multiple personality disorders; and delinquent behavior or a drop of grades in school.²² Additional indicators may include intrusive thoughts, nightmares, heightened startle response, poor concentration, and hyper-vigilance, and in some cases the child may appear depressed, withdrawn, or lethargic.²³ Children will commonly respond to their victimization with sexualized behaviors and/or age inappropriate knowledge of sexual activities.²⁴

Long-term consequences of sexual abuse may include a chronic self-perception of helplessness, hopelessness, depression, impaired trust, self-blame, self-destructive behavior, and low self-esteem.²⁵

Other long-term consequences for victims of child sexual abuse include:

- Increased likelihood of teen pregnancy: In one study, men who were sexually abused at aged 10 or younger were 80 percent more likely than non-abused men to later engage in sexual activity resulting in teen pregnancy.²⁶
- Increased likelihood of homelessness: A study of homeless women found that childhood maltreatment, including physical, verbal, and sexual abuse, was a “pervasive and devastating predictor of dysfunctional outcomes,” including chronic homelessness.²⁷
- Increased risk of drug and alcohol abuse: Research indicates that both women and men who have experienced child sexual abuse have an increased risk of drug and alcohol abuse in their adult life.²⁸

It is clear that the consequences of child sexual abuse far beyond the affected children and families. Enormous societal costs are involved. Prevent Child Abuse America estimated the economic impact of child abuse and neglect at \$104 billion in 2007; and this was likely a conservative estimate. Thus, in addition to the compelling human argument to help optimize children’s development, health and safety, there is also a financial impetus to help prevent the neglect of children. The aphorism that “our children are our nation’s most valuable resource” should be more than a slogan. Finally, at the heart of child neglect is a concern with their basic rights, their human rights.

The costs associated with the pervasive and long-lasting effects of child abuse and neglect are as undeniable as our obligation to prevent – not just respond to – this problem. In 2007, \$33 billion in direct costs for foster care services, hospitalization, mental health treatment, and law enforcement were supplemented by over \$70 billion in indirect costs like loss of individual productivity, chronic health problems, special education, and delinquent and criminal justice services.²⁹

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