



Myths and Facts about Child Sexual Abuse

MYTH: There is a universal, cross-cultural taboo against child sexual abuse which prevents its occurrence.

FACT: Child sexual abuse can and does happen. Unfortunately, the cultural taboo is against both abusing children, and against talking about the abuse.

MYTH: Child sexual abuse is rare.

FACT: Unfortunately, child sexual abuse is not rare. The most extensive study of child sexual abuse in Canada found that 1 in 2 girls and 1 in 6 boys will experience some form of sexual abuse, assault or exploitation before the age of 21.¹

MYTH: Children are usually sexually abused by strangers.

FACT: 95% of children are sexually abused by someone they know² (family members, relatives, neighbours, family friends, babysitters, teachers, religious leaders, coaches, etc.).

MYTH: Child sexual abuse only happens in rural areas and/or lower socioeconomic class neighbourhoods.

FACT: Child sexual abuse can happen anywhere. It happens in both rural and urban environments, crossing lines of socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, religion and culture.

MYTH: Only young girls are victims of child sexual abuse.

FACT: Children of any gender are vulnerable to abuse.

MYTH: The child will always fear or dislike the offender.

FACT: Perpetrators of child sexual abuse are often close family members, primary care givers or someone in a position of trust. While

children who are abused may develop feelings of anger or resentment toward their offender, the feelings of love and affection often remain. This can make children feel confused about their emotions or about what happened.

MYTH: Non-offending parents in incestuous families often know of the sexual abuse, cause it and/or condone it.

FACT: Of the non-offending parents seen at the Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton, many knew of the abuse before it was reported. The majority attempted to report the abuse. Of those who took no action, a majority were emotionally, physically and/or economically dependent on the offender. Many were controlled by the offender in the same way as the child who was being abused.

MYTH: Sexual abuse is non-violent and therefore does not injure the child.

FACT: Sexual abuse of children is violent, even if there may not be physical injuries. People who are victimized through sexual abuse may feel as if they are denied a childhood, a nurturing relationship of trust, and exploited and betrayed by a person who is in a position of authority and trust.

MYTH: Only men sexually abuse children.

FACT: While most child sexual abuse offenders are male (90%), women are also offenders, and adolescents make up 25% of the sexual offender population³. However, of the SACE clients in 2005, women accounted for up to 17% of the sexual offences.⁴

MYTH: Offenders are psychotic, crazy or easy to identify.

FACT: Offenders are uncomfortably familiar people who do not usually suffer from mental illness

or psychosis. They can be charming, friendly people who are able to gain the trust of families in order to access their children. Children who are abused often feel confused because the offender is likely a family member or someone who is in a position of trust. Many perpetrators of sexual abuse have a spouse, and can be of any race, class, religion or occupation. They seem like everyone else.

MYTH: Only homosexuals abuse children of their own sex.

FACT: Sexual abuse is a crime of power and control that it is not motivated by sexual desire. Therefore, the sexual orientation of the offender doesn't matter. Further, statistics show that most male offenders identify as heterosexual.⁵

MYTH: Children lie about sexual abuse.

FACT: Children do not have enough knowledge about sexual acts to describe something that didn't happen. If children lie about sexual abuse, it is usually to say that it did not occur in order to protect the offender and/or the family unit.

MYTH: Children are somewhat responsible for the abuse.

FACT: There is a myth that children are "seductive" and act in ways that attract abuse. However, children are not seductive. Offenders often exploit children by offering them needed love and affection in exchange for sexual "activity." Children who are sexually abused learn that attention and affection will only be given in exchange for sexual activity. They may therefore "act out" in sexual ways when they seek love. It is this response to abuse that adults interpret as "seductive."

MYTH: Child sexual abuse is a one or two-time occurrence, involving a single child.

FACT: Child sexual abuse typically goes on for quite some time with each child before discovery, and it is not usually limited to one child. Some offenders abuse more than 70 children before anyone discloses.⁶

MYTH: Child sexual abuse is a personal, family problem. "Outsiders" should not interfere.

FACT: Child sexual abuse affects all of society. Many runaway youth, gang members, adolescents who are addicted to drugs, and adolescents involved in prostitution were sexually abused as children. It is clear that child sexual abuse causes long-term social problems; therefore, it is a social concern.

MYTH: It is better not to talk about child sexual abuse because the child will forget.

FACT: Children who have experienced sexual abuse may temporarily block memories of what has happened, but the effects will surface as they grow older. Not talking about what happened will not make it go away, but it may encourage their feelings to fester. Adults often do not talk about child sexual abuse because of their own discomfort with the topic. If adults are not willing to talk about the abuse, the child may feel that there is something to be ashamed of. This attitude will only serve to increase the child's feelings of guilt, shame, self blame, and may make the recovery process more difficult for them.

1 "Child Sexual Abuse: National Clearinghouse on Family Violence," 2006 (Government of Canada)

2 "Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile", 2005 (Statistics Canada)

3 "Child Sexual Abuse: National Clearinghouse on Family Violence," 2006 (Government of Canada)

4 "Child Sexual Abuse: National Clearinghouse on Family Violence," 2006 (Government of Canada)

5 "Sex Offenders," Juristat Vol, 19, No. 2, Statistics Canada (1999)

6 "Child Sexual Abuse: National Clearinghouse on Family Violence," 2006 (Government of Canada)

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