

WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

Child sexual abuse is the improper exposure of a child to sexual contact, activity, or behaviour. This includes all forms of sexual contact, forced oral contact ("kissing"), groping, grabbing, vaginal or anal penetration, and oral genital contact ("oral sex") as well as exposure to pornography and exhibitionism. Child sexual abuse also includes asking the child to sexually touch another person, even if contact does not occur.

Child sexual abuse occurs when someone older, or someone in a position of trust, uses their authority over a child to engage that child in sexual contact. The offender may use tricks, bribes, threats, or physical force to make the child participate in sexual activity.

The age of consent in Canada is 16. This means that no child or youth under the age of 16 can consent to sexual activity with an adult. In addition, no child under the age of 12 can consent to any type of sexual activity, and no youth under the age of 18 can consent to sexual activity with someone who is in a position of power, trust, or authority over them. This includes parents and guardians, as well as teachers, coaches, babysitters, doctors, religious leaders, etc.

TOOLS FOR CHILDREN

In 95% of cases of child sexual abuse, the offender is someone the child knows (a family member, authority figure, friend, acquaintance, etc.).

Talking to children about abuse helps them learn that they have the right to grow up without violence. It also encourages them to share if they feel uncomfortable or are being abused.

Young children are taught to obey adults and are often reprimanded for saying "NO". **Children need to know that they can speak out when they feel uncomfortable**, even if they have to speak up against a person who is in a position of authority, power, or trust.

Often children who are sexually abused do not know the proper names for their genitalia. Teaching children the proper names for their private parts takes this power away from offenders and gives children the language to tell someone if they are being abused.

Another strong weapon offenders use is secrets. Adults can help children by teaching them the difference between "secrets", "surprises", and "privacy". **Explain that adults should not ask them to keep secrets that they are never allowed to tell, especially secrets about touching.**

S.P.E.A.K. PROGRAM

The Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton offers training in the Safe Preschoolers Education and Awareness Kit (S.P.E.A.K) to early childhood educators. This program provides information about child sexual abuse. The kit gives teachers the resources to educate children between the ages 3 and 6 to be aware of their bodies and feelings, and encourages kids to speak up whenever they feel uncomfortable. Please contact our Public Education Department at 780-423-4102 for more information on the program.

RESPONDING TO DISCLOSURES

When a child discloses, the most important things an adult can do are to listen, believe, affirm, support, reassure, and report. If a child tells someone about sexual abuse, it is very important for that person to tell the child that they believe them.

Children do not lie about sexual abuse; they do not have the maturity, language or knowledge to make up stories about this kind of violence.

When supporting a child who has experienced sexual abuse, the listener should not show shock at what the child says. Responding with anger, or showing shock and disgust, may send the message to the child that they did something wrong, or that they are "bad" or "disgusting." Children may even take back their stories.

Adults must not probe for more details because this can further traumatize the child. If the case goes to court, "probing" may also be damaging to the case as it may be seen as "contaminating the evidence" or putting ideas in the child's head.

INDICATORS

There are few clear signs of child sexual abuse. Many of the indicators below may be responses to other forms of trauma. Many kids exhibit these behaviours from time to time. The key is to watch for clusters (several signs at one time) rather than individual symptoms. Hints or suggestions given by a child should be taken seriously because they may be the child's way of disclosing.

Possible Indications of Child Sexual Abuse Include:

- ~ Sleeping problems, nightmares, refusal to stay in their own bed or bedroom
- ~ Regression to an earlier stage of development (thumb-sucking, bed wetting etc.)
- ~ Withdrawal, unhappiness, anxiety, excessive crying, loss of appetite
- ~ Fear of a particular adult or fear of being left alone with a particular person

- ~ Fear of being touched, shrinking away from physical contact
- ~ Attempting specific sexual behaviour with people or "sexual acting out"
- ~ Sexually transmitted diseases, yeast infections, soreness in the genital areas
- ~ Pregnancy in girls who have reached puberty.

If you are interested in seeking counselling for your child, please contact the Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton at 780-423-4102.

For concerns regarding a child's immediate safety, call the police at 911, or Alberta Children and Youth Services, Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-387-KIDS (5437). For support and information, please call the 24-Hour Sexual Assault Crisis Line at 780-423-4102.

HEALING PROCESS

Contrary to popular belief, sexual abuse of children is not rare and can happen regardless of socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, ability, culture, or religion. It can happen to any family and occurs more than we would like to think. Estimates suggest one in three girls and one in six boys will have unwanted sexual contact with an adult before they reach the age of 18.¹

Fortunately, a child can heal from the effects of the abuse. With the support of their family, friends, and community, youth can deal with the sexual abuse or assault and improve their self-esteem and outlook on life.

"Overview Paper: Child Sexual Abuse," National Clearing House on Family Violence, 2006 (Government of Canada).

ALBERTA CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

The Alberta Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act states that if an adult knows or suspects that a child is being abused or neglected, they must call **1-800-387-5437** to contact a local child welfare authority.

