

## 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 (i.e. forced kissing, fondling, vaginal or anal intercourse, and oral sexual contact), as well as exposure to pornography, and exhibitionism.

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

## Self Blame

Survivors commonly blame themselves for what happened. They may ask, "Why did I deserve this?" or "How could this have happened to me?" These reactions are normal and valid. Many offenders "groom" children by giving that child love and affection through gifts or extra attention. This establishes a relationship of trust with the child. Then, the offender may use that relationship of trust to manipulate, bribe, trick or force that child into sexual contact. An offender might also make the child feel as if they were equal participants, or even that the child was in control. However, nothing the child did or did not do caused the assault. The offender is the only person to blame.

## Common Reactions to Trauma

Some common reactions or responses to traumatic events such as sexual abuse include:

### Physical:

- ~ Nervous energy, jitters, muscle tension
- ~ Upset stomach
- ~ Rapid heart rate
- ~ Dizziness
- ~ Lack of energy, fatigue
- ~ Teeth grinding

### Psychological:

- ~ Changes in the way a person sees him or herself, other people and/or the world
- ~ Heightened awareness of surroundings (hyper-vigilance)
- ~ Lessened awareness, disconnection from self (dissociation)
- ~ Poor attention, memory problems
- ~ Difficulty making decisions
- ~ Intrusive images, nightmares, flashbacks

### Emotional:

- ~ Fear, feeling unsafe or helpless
- ~ Sadness, grief, depression
- ~ Guilt
- ~ Anger, irritability
- ~ Numbness, lack of feelings
- ~ Inability to enjoy anything
- ~ Loss of trust or self-esteem
- ~ Emotional distancing from other people

### Behavioural

- ~ Withdrawn or isolated from others
- ~ Easily startled
- ~ Avoiding certain situations
- ~ Sleeping too much or not enough
- ~ Confrontational or aggressive
- ~ Changes in eating habits

## Flashbacks and Triggers

Flashbacks are memories of past trauma. They can involve any or all of the senses (pictures, sounds, smells, sensations, tastes, emotions). They can be extremely intense. The survivor may feel as if they are re-experiencing the original trauma.

A trigger is what sparks a flashback. A trigger can involve any or all of the senses - that is, it can be a sound, smell, sight, texture or taste. If a person can identify triggers, they may choose to avoid them, which is okay.

To cope with flashbacks, it helps to re-orient the survivor to the safety and security of the present by reminding them of their surroundings:

- ~ Remember that this is a flashback, and that this is normal
- ~ Realize that the worst is over, and these are sensations from the past, not now
- ~ Use grounding techniques-clap hands, change body position, wash face in cold water, blink repeatedly, stomp feet, or anything else that is a reminder of the present
- ~ Use five senses to reconnect with current reality - look at colours and shapes in room, listen to sounds, feel what is touching the body (chair, clothes, the floor)
- ~ Go to a safe place
- ~ Say positive things

### Healing

Healing is different for each person. Some people may want to talk about the abuse, while others may not be ready to discuss it. Healing may take place at different points or times in the survivor's life, and each person may have different concerns or barriers that arise. Regardless of gender, many survivors share many of the same concerns, but there are some things that are specific obstacles for men, including fewer services for male survivors and attitudes that deny that men can experience sexual violence.

## **Supporting Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse**

- ~ Listen without interrupting and asking questions that begin with "why"
- ~ Believe the person who discloses to you
- ~ Recognize that it can be hard for survivors to talk about abuse
- ~ Remember that the survivor did what they needed to in order to get through what happened
- ~ Remind the person that a child is never responsible for what somebody else does to them; the offender is the only one to blame
- ~ Let the person know that they are not alone, and that their responses to the abuse are normal and valid
- ~ Help the person explore options

## **Counselling Programs**

SACE offers no-fee counselling for all survivors of sexual violence, regardless of gender or age. The centre offers individual counselling and group therapy to address and overcome the effects of sexual abuse. To make an appointment, contact the adult intake worker at 780-423-4102.

The 24-Hour Sexual Assault Crisis Line (780-423-4121) is staffed by trained volunteers and offers support, information, and referrals. This service is available anytime and is completely anonymous.

