

Session 1: What Is Child Sexual Abuse?

NOTE: This Help Wanted session may be useful to people of any age. However, it was originally designed with adolescents and young people in mind. When we refer to sexual interest in "younger children" we mean younger than you if you are under the age of 18. If you are 18 or older, please interpret "younger children" as referring to anyone under the age of 18.

Introduction

In this session, we're going to talk about what child sexual abuse is and the effects and consequences of child sexual abuse for victims and people who commit abuse.

What Is Child Sexual Abuse?

Not all people who are sexually attracted to children act on their attraction. To support yourself in not offending, it's important to understand what actions are considered child sexual abuse so you can avoid hurting others and yourself.

To be clear, when we discuss child sexual abuse, we're not talking about typical teenage sexual experiences between two willing teens who are about the same age.

'Child' refers to someone under the age of 18 and usually at least three years younger than the person committing the abuse.

Child sexual abuse is involving a child in sexual activity. That activity can be anything that feels sexual to the person committing the abuse. It might not even include touching a child.

Here are some examples of child sexual abuse:

- Touching a child's genitals, or private parts, for sexual pleasure
- Making a child look at or touch someone else's genitals
- Playing sexual games with a child
- Masturbating, or touching yourself, while you're with a child, or making a child touch their own genitals
- Putting body parts (such as tongue, fingers, or penis) or objects in the mouth, vagina, or anus of a child
- Sexual phone calls, text messages, or online communication
- Inappropriately watching a child undress or use the bathroom
- Child pornography; creating, owning, sharing, or viewing sexual images or movies that include anyone under the age of 18--even yourself or a same-aged romantic partner

Grooming

Some people try to prepare a child for sex. This is called "grooming," and it can lead to child sexual abuse.

Grooming can include things like:

- Spending time alone with a child when sexually interested in that child
- Sharing secrets with a child
- Giving a child gifts or special attention
- Telling sexual jokes or stories to a child
- Having close physical contact with a child, such as massage, showers, or piggy back rides

Someone who doesn't intend to groom a child for sex but gets emotionally or physically close to a child might end up taking advantage of that closeness and sexually abuse the child.

Now You Know

Sexual attraction is personal—we know that people attracted to younger children aren't all attracted in the same way. Knowing what actions are child sexual abuse or could be grooming can help you set boundaries and make good decisions about what situations *you* should avoid.

A good way to think about it is that any behavior with a child that makes you feel sexually excited or "turned on" is not okay. Those behaviors with that child make it more likely you will abuse a child.

You should also use good judgment to avoid situations with children that *could* become sexual—even if that isn't what you intended.

Some people who commit child sexual abuse might tell themselves, 'the child wanted to' or 'the child liked it' if a child responds sexually or participates willingly. But children cannot consent to sex of any kind, and these behaviors are harmful and illegal.

Is This Child Sexual Abuse?

Are you unsure if a behavior you're thinking about would be child sexual abuse?

If you're ever unsure if something you want to do with a child would be considered child sexual abuse, ask yourself, "Could this make me feel sexually excited?"

If the answer is yes, avoid the activity and avoid being alone with the child. If you're still not sure, you can visit StopItNow.org and anonymously chat with a counselor.

Attraction Versus Action

When we're talking about child sexual abuse, there is a big difference between *having* an attraction to children and *acting* on an attraction to children.

Just because someone has an attraction to children doesn't mean they will sexually abuse a child—most people have sexual attractions they choose not to act on.

There are many people who are attracted to children who haven't harmed children and won't harm children. Likewise, there are many people who have sexually abused children who are not attracted to children.

Let's take a minute to review some terms.

Term: Child sexual abuse

Definition: Involving a child in sexual activity

Term: Person with pedophilia

Definition: Someone over the age of 16 who is attracted to children who haven't reached puberty

Term: Sex offender

Definition: Someone who commits child sexual abuse

Term: Grooming behaviors

Definition: Actions to create a close emotional or physical relationship with a child to more easily abuse them sexually

Term: Consent

Definition: To give permission to participate in sexual activity; children can't consent

What Are the Effects of Child Sexual Abuse for Victims?

Sexual abuse can be painful, scary, or confusing for a child. Many children who are sexually abused know and trust the person who abuses them. They often don't understand they are being abused.

Children become aware of sexual abuse in different ways and over time. It can be extremely upsetting when they realize what really happened to them.

The consequences of child sexual abuse can stay with victims their entire lives. Studies tell us that children who are sexually abused can experience problems with their physical and mental health from childhood through adulthood.

Victims of child sexual abuse are also at risk of having relationship problems and educational problems, and they are more likely to be victims of other sexual and nonsexual abuse.

In the following section you'll hear victims of child sexual abuse share how the abuse affected them.

Survivor Stories

Below are three personal accounts of how child sexual abuse affected the victim.

Survivor Story One

"We met at the start of middle school, and he became my best friend. When I disclosed to him that my uncle had molested me, I think that was the catalyst for him, what started him thinking of me as someone who was already a victim. And so, it started with really demeaning comments and constantly down playing my work. The first time he sexually assaulted me was at a friend's birthday party. And then, it just kind of continued and got worse until eventually I transferred from that school.

I went from being a straight-A student and being really engaged in class, really enjoying school, to developing a pretty severe anxiety around school. My grades plummeted. Even now, I have a really hard time interacting with men. Not just around romantic and sexual interactions. It's when a guy gets too close to me, I flinch. When a man raises his voice, I freeze. Walking down the street, I have to look behind myself at least probably every 20 seconds. My sense of safety is pretty nonexistent. The sense of self-worth that I struggle with has gotten better as I've gotten older, but it's still really hard."

Survivor Story Two

"My experience happened when I was eight years old. The person who abused me, the older child, he was about 15 or so. I knew him from the apartment complex where I lived. Anyway, I was walking back to my apartment and he wanted me to come into his bedroom. I thought that was really cool, because here's this older kid that wants to do something with me. I went in the bedroom and he wanted me to take off my clothes, and I did. He also took off his clothes and I remember him talking to me about how I needed to learn how to have sex with girls. He asked me to lay down on his bed, face down and he got on top of me, and I don't remember a great deal after that. I remember that I came home later that evening and I still didn't really have an understanding about what had happened.

I told my mom, and of course my mom and my dad both were really upset. I remember talking to a police officer. I felt like I had done something really wrong, and that I was the reason that my parents were so upset. My parents sat me down and told me, "We're not upset with you. You did nothing wrong." But that didn't change how I felt about it. I still felt incredibly guilty.

Of course, now I know that I didn't do anything wrong. But, it was a hard few years for me as a kid. I suffered from some depression and feeling that I was pretty different from other people. I struggled for a lot of years with compulsivity and addiction.

And for a long time, sex was really terrifying for me, actually being physically intimate with a woman. With my first three girlfriends, I don't think I actually ever had sex with any of them. I was just so scared. There was a lot of fear, there was a lot of shame, there was a lot of embarrassment.

Being introduced to sex in that context, and that young, it harmed me, for sure."

Survivor Story Three

"I remember these teenage girls from the neighborhood showing up at the door and asking if I could come out and play. They had a little girl with them who was about the same age as me, about seven, and I thought, "Okay, cool."

We wound up in the woods. They instructed me and this little girl to take off our clothes, and then they were having us do various sexual things with each other. Mostly touching, none of it involved penetration, but I just remember thinking it was just weird.

They wanted us to kiss each other's privates and stuff like that. I remember being, I guess a seven-year-old version of "sexually excited" at the time. I didn't even know what sex was or what we were doing. Not too long after that we moved out of state, and it was one of those things that I put in the back of my mind. Then when I was almost 19 I was going through a really, really desperately suicidal period.

A lot of that had to do with me struggling with the fact that I was a pedophile, and that it was a big secret. I couldn't tell anybody, and I was really ashamed of myself. I finally broke down to a friend of mine, and I told him about everything, including the childhood experiences and the fact that I was a pedophile.

It hurt a lot more to talk about when I was 19 than it actually did to go through when I was seven, if that makes any sense. I guess it's because at that point I had perspective, and at seven, I didn't have any perspective on what had happened.

I think that experience, and some others, damaged me in a lot of ways, in terms of how I relate to people, how I do not feel comfortable at all in relationships, how I'm not attracted to other adults."

Consequences of Sexually Abusing Children

In addition to the serious and long-lasting effects of child sexual abuse on victims, there are serious consequences for people who sexually abuse children.

People who sexually abuse children can be arrested, prosecuted, and sent to prison.

People who are convicted of child sexual abuse might be required to register on public sex offender registries for a long time, sometimes for life. This means that their name, address, photograph, and crime can be published online and in newspapers.

Being known as a 'registered sex offender' can make it hard to finish school, get a job, find housing, and maintain relationships with family members and friends.

People who sexually abuse a child can be required to go live in a residential sex offender therapy facility. They might not be allowed to return home if they have younger siblings.

Along with suffering legal and social consequences, people who sexually abuse a child often feel remorse and emotional guilt.

Conclusion

It's wrong to involve a child in sexual activity. A child cannot legally or emotionally "consent" or agree to any sexual activity.

Child sexual abuse can have damaging and long-lasting effects for victims. And there are serious consequences—legal and emotional—for people who sexually abuse children.

If you're visiting this site for support, you're probably doing your best to manage your sexual attraction to children. What we can tell you is that we know that child sexual abuse is preventable, especially when you have the right supports.

Our research tells us many people who are sexually attracted to children will never sexually abuse a child. People don't have to act on their attractions. In other sessions, we'll provide strategies to help manage attraction to children and avoid child sexual abuse. You can also visit our [Resources page](#) for additional resources.

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