

# Child Sexual Abuse I

## An Overview of Statistics, Adverse Effects, and Prevention Strategies

Child sexual abuse affects tens of thousands of children and young teens every year. Though sexual abuse is all too common, many adults are unprepared or unwilling to deal with the problem when faced with it, leading to underreporting of the crime and stigmatizing of the victim. Child sexual abuse can take many forms, but is always a violation of a young person's rights, and increases the risk of many adverse physical and mental health conditions. An atmosphere of silence and poor communication around sexuality contributes to child sexual abuse. Programs can help empower young people to report unwanted contact and can prepare parents, clergy, and youth-serving professionals to recognize the signs of child abuse and take appropriate action.

### CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE RATES HAVE DECLINED BUT MANY REMAIN AT RISK

Child sexual abuse is defined in various ways, making it challenging to generalize about its prevalence in society and its effect on children, teens, and families.<sup>1,2</sup>

- Many professionals define child sexual abuse broadly to include both direct genital contact and indirect interactions such as 'exposure' or internet-based activity (for example, the sending of electronic sexual images to minors) up through age 17.<sup>3,4,5</sup>
- Others have defined child sexual abuse much more narrowly, such as "unwanted sex" with a perpetrator who is older, before the age of 14 years.<sup>6</sup>
- Despite the obstacles to data collection, it is estimated that child sexual abuse has declined by more than 50 percent in the U.S. since the early 1990s, based on reports to child protection agencies and law enforcement officials.<sup>2,3,7</sup>
- Recent estimates suggest that between 1-3 percent of U.S. youth experience child sexual abuse in any given year.<sup>2,3</sup>
- Substantiated cases of child sexual abuse – i.e. cases in which accusations have been confirmed with evidence - are estimated to

be a small proportion of actual incidents of child sexual abuse. Only a small proportion of victims disclose their experiences, and among those many wait to disclose until months or years after they experienced the abuse.<sup>7</sup>

- Mandated reporters of child sexual abuse – for example, teachers, medical providers, or others who serve youth – are required in the U.S. to report *suspected* child sexual abuse to child protection or law enforcement authorities.<sup>8,9</sup>

### SOME CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ARE MORE AT RISK FOR SEXUAL ABUSE

- Females are more likely than males to experience child sexual abuse. Estimates of prevalence range widely, with studies suggesting that 12-40 percent of females and 4-16.5 percent of males in the U.S. have experienced at least one instance of sexual abuse in childhood or adolescence.<sup>3,10,11</sup>
- Research indicates a connection between bullying and child sexual abuse, with bully/victims (those youth who bully their peers and have also been bullied) especially at risk for child sexual abuse.<sup>12</sup>
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth are more likely to have experienced sexual abuse than heterosexual youth. However, sexual abuse does not "cause" heterosexual youth to become LGBTQ.<sup>13,14,15</sup>
- Youth with physical, emotional, or cognitive disabilities are over three times more at risk for child sexual abuse than their non-disabled peers, and may not be able to disclose to a trusted adult because of a disability which impairs communication (e.g. a hearing-impaired youth who has not been taught sign language for this concept).<sup>9</sup>
- Youth are at higher risk for child sexual abuse if they live in households characterized by instability, interpersonal conflict, and other forms of abuse.<sup>16</sup>

THE FACTS

# An atmosphere of trust, confidentiality, and openness to discussing sexual issues all contribute to prevention of child sexual abuse.

- Children who live with only one parent are at elevated risk of child sexual abuse, particularly by males who are sexually involved with the mothers but not fully part of the household.<sup>3</sup>
- Youth who have experienced child sexual abuse are also more likely to have witnessed violence at home or experienced other forms of physical or emotional abuse at home.<sup>17</sup>

## **PATTERNS AMONG PERPETRATORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE**

- Most perpetrators of child sexual abuse are relatives or close acquaintances of the youth they target. “Stranger Danger” – the notion that youth are at highest risk of sexual abuse from strangers – is a widely-accepted myth that continues to drive public policy around this issue.<sup>18</sup>
- Among those known to have committed child sexual abuse, the vast majority are male. Among juvenile offenders, over 90 percent of known perpetrators are male.<sup>3,19</sup>
- Juvenile offenders account for over 1 in 3 known perpetrators of child sexual abuse. The majority of under-age youth who commit sexual offenses against other youth are male, and are more likely to act in groups against more vulnerable males (especially against pre-pubescent male children).<sup>19</sup>
- Although perpetrators are more likely than others to have experienced sexual abuse during their own childhood, most victims of sexual abuse do not go on to commit sexual abuse later in life.<sup>7</sup>
- Recidivism rates for child sexual abuse are far lower than widely believed by the general public, and are lower than recidivism rates for many other criminal behaviors. Recidivism rates for juvenile offenders are especially low.<sup>3,19</sup>

## **SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF CHILD SEX ABUSE**

In most substantiated cases of child sexual abuse, there are no physical symptoms of harm to alert adults.<sup>8</sup>

- Child sexual abuse most often comes to the attention of adults when children disclose, although only a small percentage of sexually abused youth disclose due to a variety of factors:
- Youth may have been threatened with harm by the perpetrator if they tell someone.<sup>7,20</sup>
- Some youth may fear that other adults will not believe them if they disclose.<sup>20</sup>
- Often, youth blame themselves for the abuse.<sup>20</sup>
- In some cases, youth do not understand the activity to be harmful and maintain secrecy because sexual matters are normally not discussed in their household.<sup>20</sup>

Youth affected by sexual abuse may come to the attention of an adult through indirect signals that something is wrong: age-inappropriate sexual language or behavior, avoidance of certain close family members or acquaintances, or avoidance of certain locations may all be indicators that the youth has experienced sexually abusive conduct by an adult or peer.<sup>9</sup>

## **THE EFFECTS OF CHILD SEX ABUSE ARE SEVERE AND FAR REACHING**

Child sexual abuse contributes to health disparities. People who have experienced sexual abuse as children are at higher risk for numerous adverse health conditions. The impact of sexual abuse may not become evident for some individuals until later in adulthood.

- Mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), insomnia, and lack of trust in others are reported more often by people who have experienced child sexual abuse.<sup>1,5,10,13</sup>
- Physical health conditions such as HIV or other STDs, unintended pregnancy, alcohol or other drug abuse, hypertension, and obesity are all reported with greater frequency among people who have experienced child sexual abuse.<sup>1,6,8,13,17</sup>

Many survivors of sexual abuse overcome adverse health conditions, and can prove

especially resilient when provided with therapy and other supports that empower them to take control over their lives and relationships.<sup>3,11,16,20</sup>

## CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Cultural taboos against talking about sexual issues may hinder the willingness of youth to disclose, or of adults to believe youth when they tell what happened.<sup>21</sup>
- Highly regimented ideas about females and virginity, especially beliefs that place the burden of responsibility for a family's honor on females, may inhibit girls from disclosing sexual abuse out of fear that they will be blamed and punished.<sup>20,21</sup>
- Highly regimented ideas about males and authority, especially beliefs that adult males must be respected and deferred to, may inhibit youth of any gender from resisting or reporting adult male perpetrators.<sup>20,21</sup>
- In recent-immigrant communities where some residents may not be legal citizens, disclosing sexual abuse to child protection or law enforcement authorities can be especially risky for youth as well as adults who suspect child sexual abuse, since removal of a perpetrator may jeopardize other family relations through citizenship status checks and the threat of deportation.<sup>7,21</sup>
- In low-income families dependent on a sole breadwinner, such as a single mother, youth victims as well as adult witnesses may be reluctant to disclose sexual abuse for fear that the sole earner of income will be removed from the household.<sup>7,21</sup>
- In communities of color in the U.S., long histories of distrust toward social welfare and law enforcement agencies may hinder the willingness of youth or adults to disclose child sexual abuse, or report suspected sexual abuse, to authorities. Racial and ethnic communities with historical experiences of discrimination stigma may be concerned that "airing dirty laundry" around the prevalence of child sexual abuse in their community could result in outsiders' invoking such information to justify further discriminatory treatment.<sup>7,21</sup>

## PREVENTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

An atmosphere of trust, confidentiality, and openness to discussing sexual issues all contribute to prevention of child sexual abuse.

These social determinants also contribute to the healing and resilience of people who have experienced sexual abuse.<sup>21</sup>

- School-based prevention programs that teach avoidance skills to youth show evidence that youth empowerment and safety can be increased, and also help reduce stigma and self-blame for sexually abused youth.<sup>3,22</sup>
- Training of medical providers, school staff, clergy, child protection caseworkers, forensic interviewers, and law enforcement officials can increase the willingness of youth to disclose child sexual abuse as well as the willingness of adults to report suspected abuse.<sup>2,14,23</sup>
- Training parents to refute common myths around "stranger danger" can help to increase their awareness of far more common (and preventable) sexual abuse risk factors in the household.<sup>18,22</sup>
- Training parents to teach proper names for genitals and other reproductive organs to their youngest children can help to increase youths' empowerment to resist sexual abuse or disclose it to trusted adults. It can also reduce shame, stigma, and self-blame for youth who have experienced child sexual abuse.<sup>22,24</sup>
- Evidence is lacking that laws and policies prevent child sexual abuse when they focus on monitoring and restricting known perpetrators. There is stronger evidence that sexual abuse is prevented – rather than simply avenged - through laws, policies, and fully-funded programs that focus on early identification of people at risk for committing child sexual abuse. Effective strategies help those at-risk of committing sexual abuse by confronting attitudes and behaviors that contribute to exploitation of children. Effective strategies also hold open the possibility for offenders – especially juvenile offenders whose recidivism rates are low – to re-integrate into society and establish productive and trusting relationships with family and community members.<sup>2,3,7,22</sup>

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*Child sexual abuse is found in all racial and ethnic communities in the U.S., and at all income levels. However, in some communities sexual abuse is less likely to be disclosed for several complex reasons.*

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