

Psychoeducation Information Sheet for Caregivers

Section 1: Child Abuse Characteristics

What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse involves the touching of or looking at a child's private parts (vagina, breasts, penis, buttocks) by an adult or an older child. Additionally, child sexual abuse includes when a sexual offender asks a child to touch or look at their private parts (vagina, breasts, penis, buttocks). Child sexual abuse involves differences in power and control between the offender and the victim. For instance, a sexual offender may have greater power or control due to differences in age, intelligence, financial resources, and/or he or she may be in a caretaking role. Sexual offenders may use rewards, bribes, tricks, or force in order to gain the victims trust and/or to get the victim to allow the perpetrator to abuse them.

What is child physical abuse?

Child physical abuse is when someone hits a child and leaves marks and/or bruising on their body. It may involve hitting with one's hands or an object such as a belt, wire hanger, extension cord, and so forth. Child physical abuse is usually perpetrated by a person in a caregiving role or someone who knows the child and may involve excessive physical punishment. Usually, people physically abuse children when they are angry or frustrated and may not have familiarity with effective nonviolent behavioral management strategies. Physical abuse always involves a power imbalance.

How many children are abused?

Abuse happens to a lot of children. For sexual abuse, 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 7 boys will have been sexually abused by the time they are 18 (Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, 2006; Sapp & Vandeven, 2005). For physical abuse, 1 in 5 children will experience physical abuse by the time they are 18 (Briere & Elliott, 2003; Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2013).

Who are the people who sexually abuse children?

Despite warnings of "stranger danger," we know that 90% of sexual offenders are someone who knew their victim. Often the offender is a relative or friend of the family. Surprisingly, around 30% of sexual offenders are juveniles, meaning that they are under 18 years of age. Sexual offenders have a compulsive problem and may offend against multiple victims. Although many sexual offenders were sexually abused themselves, this does not excuse their behaviors.

Section 2: Information About Survivors

Who gets sexually abused?

Sexual abuse affects children of all ages, genders, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

How do children react to child sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse affects each child differently. However, there are a number of behavioral and emotional problems that are commonly associated with victimization. Children who have been sexually abused may experience shame, sadness, anxiety, self-blame, and fear that they may be victimized again in the future. They may also display rule-breaking behavior, defiance, and sexually inappropriate behaviors. Additionally, children who have been sexually abused may withdraw from friends and family.

Why are children often reluctant to talk about it?

In the aftermath of sexual abuse, children are often reluctant to talk about what happened due to a number of factors. They may be ashamed of what happened or feel afraid that they will get in trouble because of the abuse. They may blame themselves or feel guilty. The child may be protecting the perpetrator, as is

sometimes the case when a caregiver or relative commits the offense. Similarly, children may be afraid that if they talk about the abuse it will negatively impact their family, or they may be afraid that the perpetrator will hurt them if they talk about it

Section 3: The Role of the Caregiver

How are caregivers impacted by child sexual abuse?

It is common for caregivers of children who are sexually abused to experience a variety of feelings including anger, sadness, shame, guilt, and betrayal among others. Additionally, caregivers may feel hypervigilant and over-protective of their children and may experience symptoms of trauma such as nightmares and intrusive thoughts. Whatever feelings you are experiencing, it is important to understand that they are normal reactions to an upsetting situation. Despite how painful your emotions may be, it is helpful to know that they are only temporary, and that through the treatment process you will learn how to heal and move forward.

What should a caregiver do if their child has been sexually abused?

If your child has been sexually abused, you should report the offense to the proper authorities (e.g., police, child protective services). Additionally, it is important to be supportive of your child and to emphasize that they are not to blame for what happened. As one of the most important adults in your child's life, you must build trust, compassion, and understanding with them.

How can a caregiver help their child through treatment?

Consistent involvement in therapy is critical to help your child get through this difficult time in their life. We know that treatment works best if at least one caregiver is closely involved and frequently collaborates in the treatment process.

What can a caregiver do to protect the child from being abused again?

The best way to prevent future instances of abuse is to get your child into treatment and ensure that he or she receives education and training on how to stay safe. Additionally, you should encourage your child to be open and honest with you and other trusting adults, who you identify together.

Section 4: Child Welfare and the Legal Process

What role do child protective services play?

Child protective services are state organizations responsible for ensuring the safety of children. These responsibilities include ensuring that children are living in suitable conditions, have their basic needs met (e.g., food, clothing, etc.), are provided with education, medical and mental health services, and that they are not put in harm's way. These organizations may provide families with services and/or supports if they are having difficulties meeting their children's needs.

What is the legal process?

Following an allegation of sexual abuse, your child may be asked to provide testimony to the prosecutor's office and/or in court. Additionally, you may be asked to give a statement. During your child's testimony, your child may be interviewed on videotape by a child-friendly specialist whose job it is to create a safe, comfortable, and warm atmosphere. Following the child's testimony, prosecutors and detectives will gather evidence and attempt to build a case against the alleged perpetrator. Unfortunately, in many cases there is a lack of physical evidence to confirm the abuse allegations (for example, if the abuse occurred several months prior to the child's disclosure). Additionally, sexual abuse often occurs behind closed doors and there may not be a witness to the crime. Due to the difficulty associated with prosecuting such cases, experts at the prosecutor's office evaluate each case on an individual basis to make a determination about whether to pursue legal charges.

Section 5: The Treatment Process

What is the purpose of the medical evaluation?

Medical evaluations are conducted in order to identify physical evidence of abuse, to ensure the health and wellness of the child, and to assess for any other medical needs. Following medical evaluation, children are referred for additional medical services if deemed necessary.

What is the purpose of a psychological evaluation?

Psychological evaluations are conducted in order to assess the psychological, behavioral, and emotional functioning of the child. Additionally, psychosocial evaluations assess the mental health needs of the child and will provide recommendations for helpful services.

What is psychotherapy and how does it help my child?

Psychotherapy for children who have been sexually abused is a process that may occur individually with a therapist or in a group setting with other children who have been abused. Regardless of the setting, psychotherapy provides a chance for children to talk about their feelings, learn about abuse and how to stay safe, and allows them to discuss and process their abuse experiences in a supportive, healing atmosphere. Involvement in psychotherapy leads to improvements in psychological, behavioral, and emotional functioning as well as reduced risk of future victimization.

