

What is Child Sexual Abuse?

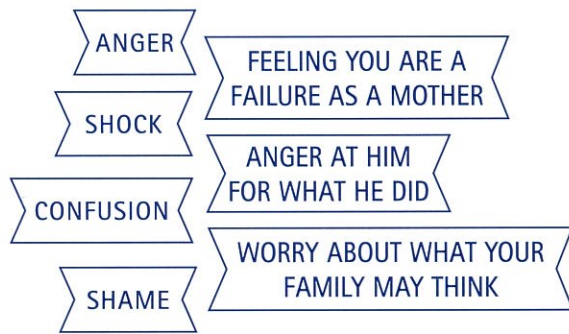
Child sexual abuse is when an adult abuses a child in a sexual manner for his/her own sexual gratification. This can include touching the child or forcing the child to touch them; showing pornography; making sexual comments; exposing themselves to the child; kissing; intercourse; penetration with a finger or object; masturbation and other acts. The abuser uses emotional manipulation, blackmail, threats, deceit and often physical violence.

Incest is sexual activities imposed on a young person/child by any person in their direct or extended family. The offender is either a family member, including father, uncle, brother, grandfather, or nephew, or someone with the care of the child such as a step parent, de facto spouse or foster parent.

If you have found out that your child has been sexually abused you will probably be overwhelmed by many feelings. You may feel your life has been thrown upside down and every aspect of it is in turmoil. It is difficult to face the fact that most abusers are known to the child and trusted by them, and much of the abuse takes place within the home.

Child sexual abuse is a crime

It is common to have a wide range of feelings when you find out your child has been abused. Feelings may come and go and initially you may be feeling numb and in shock. If the perpetrator was someone known and trusted by you and your child you may experience feelings such as:



Remember it's not your fault, and it's not your child's fault!

- Share information about what is happening, eg: going to court. Try not to hide things.
- Give your child appropriate decision making power over what to do.
- Be careful not to make promises you cannot keep.

Looking after yourself

Although your child has been abused, it is important to look after yourself too.

- Remember it is not your fault.
- Be kind to yourself. You and your family are going through difficult times.
- Talk to other women who have had similar experiences.
- Seek out support for yourself, maybe a friend or a counsellor, it is important to find someone you can trust.

Your Rights

You have the right to:

- Be treated with care, consideration, dignity and not be judged.
- Confidentiality.
- Have your religious, cultural and language needs respected.
- Ask any question and receive the answers you understand.
- A female interpreter either on-site or via the telephone.



Even if the abuser was unknown to you, these feelings will be similar.

Why didn't I know?

This is a commonly asked question by mothers if they find out the abuse occurred within the home. Incest relies on secrecy and the abuser is usually adept at trickery, silence and persuasion. It is also common for him to lie to the child about the mother and blame her for his behaviour. With this going on how can the mother be expected to know?

"Very few mothers realise that incest is happening until they are told" (1)

Was I responsible for it happening?

You are not responsible for the abuse happening even if you were sick, working, discontented, frightened of him, no longer in a sexually active relationship with him. It is not your responsibility to look out for the abuser's behaviour. There is inherent trust in an adult child relationship, and the abuser is responsible for this violation of trust.

Confused feelings toward the abuser

It is natural to have confused feelings towards the abuser, particularly if he is your partner. These feelings may move from anger at one moment to still caring for him at the next. You may feel guilty for still having feelings for him and ashamed to share this with anyone else. He may be telling everyone he is innocent and making you or your child out to be the guilty one. Other people may support him and this could make you feel alone and having to defend yourself.

What to do now ...

Some things to consider, questions to ask or actions to take

- If your child is being abused by your husband, partner, or someone living with you, you must act to protect your child from further abuse. You may choose to leave the home or to have that person leave the home. You may choose to leave the relationship or not to. You may need to talk to someone about your choice.
- The Department of Families will become involved if the case is incest and is to do with a child 18 years or younger, or if there are continuing child protection concerns.
- For children at school, contact with a teacher/school counsellor may be necessary to support the child.
- Your other children may need support too, don't forget them.
- How will you respond if people from your community find out?
- Legal implications - what will happen if my child reports the abuse? Will she/he be believed? Can someone support us make a statement?
- If it was incest, will I be able to trust him again?
- Who do I believe if he denies the abuse or says it was the child's fault?
- If it happened to me as a child... How do I feel about it now?

How your child may change

After this traumatic incident in your child's life you may notice some changes in them and their behaviour. If they are quite young, it may seem as if they have lost their child like nature and qualities. They may also have trouble sleeping, waking with nightmares.

It may seem that they are sometimes "off" somewhere – detaching themselves from everyday events. Recognise that memories may be triggered by any unrelated event. Some children may experience suicidal or self-destructive feelings; engage in excessively aggressive behaviour and/or inappropriate sexual games; have sexually transmitted infections among other things after being sexually assaulted. Your child needs to be in contact with a counsellor and receive professional support.

What to do to help your child

Even with all of the emotions that are overwhelming you at the moment, you will need to be there for your child. Your initial reaction is vital, so your child feels acknowledged and supported. To be helpful in supporting your child:

- Ensure your child/children are safe and protected from further abuse.
- Believe them and tell them this.
- Praise them for telling.
- Stress that it is not their fault.
- Let the child talk about it when they want, don't keep questioning them.
- Try to understand why they couldn't tell you before.
- Allow them to express their feelings openly eg. anger.
- Respect their right to privacy if they don't want anyone else to know.
- Help them find a support person/counsellor/teacher if they want to discuss it further.

What some other mothers have said:

- *"I felt as if my life had been taken over..."*
- *"I feel like I want revenge"*
- *"... the legal system doesn't make you satisfied"*
- *"When it happened, I wish I had acted straight away - it would have been easier with the legal system..."*
- *"No-one will understand how you are feeling until it happens to them"*
- *"Getting involved in a new relationship is a big gamble if you have children"*

Facts

- In 85% of abuse cases, the abuser is known to the child. ⁽¹⁾
- Between 90 and 97% of abusers are men.⁽¹⁾
- Sexual abuse occurs in all kinds of families regardless of the culture, religion, economic status or level of education of those involved.
- Children rarely lie about sexual abuse.
- 98% of cases are found to be true.⁽²⁾
- Even if there is no medical evidence of the abuse, this does not mean it hasn't occurred.
- Whether or not the child appears to consent, sexual activity between adults and children is always abusive.⁽³⁾

References

- (1) *Facing the Unthinkable* (1990) Dymrna House, NSW.
- (2) *Child Sexual Assault* (1985) NSW Child Protection Council.
- (3) *Child Abuse Prevention Information Kit* (1990) Department of Families.

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