

## ***Sexual Abuse***

### **Types**

Sexual abuse of a child includes many different types. It can include looking at the sexual or other intimate parts of a child's body. It can be touching—child to abuser, abuser to child. Sexual abuse can be intercourse or oral sex. It can also include prostitution of a child for money, drugs, or material goods such as furniture. It can also be pornography—taking pictures of a child, filming them, or using the computer for the sexual abuse of children. Children are not able to give consent to have sex or participate in sexual behavior. The age of consent is 16 in Pennsylvania.

### **Lures**

Perpetrators of sexual abuse use many different ways to get children involved in sexual activities. It could be the mere establishment of a special relationship, giving much attention to the child that he or she craves. It could be pets, special toys, rides and computer games or money.

Sometimes perpetrators use threats of physical harm, family separation, or of no one believing the child as a way to continue the secrecy of sexual abuse. Perpetrators can be very manipulative and persuasive in getting the child to participate in the sexual activity and not tell anyone.

### **Signs and Symptoms of Abuse**

No one symptom alone will indicate sexual abuse. Look for a change in the child's behavior and a pattern of multiple symptoms, such as:

- ❖ Injury to the genital area
- ❖ Torn, stained, or bloodied underclothing
- ❖ Itching in the genital area
- ❖ STDs
- ❖ Trauma to the mouth
- ❖ Rectal bleeding
- ❖ Fear that something is wrong with the genital area or statements that the body is dirty or damaged
- ❖ Mutilation of own body: cutting or burning
- ❖ New fears of people or places
- ❖ Reluctance to go home
- ❖ Depression or withdrawal from family and friends
- ❖ Aggressive or regressive behavior, anger or irritability
- ❖ Sleep problems, nightmares, or bedwetting

- ❖ Inability to stay awake or concentrate for extended periods
- ❖ Low self-esteem
- ❖ Secretiveness
- ❖ Suicidal behavior
- ❖ Change in personal hygiene: poor hygiene or excessive cleanliness
- ❖ Refusal to attend school
- ❖ Excessive clinging to parent when separating
- ❖ Delinquency/behavior problems
- ❖ Drop in grades
- ❖ Unusual knowledge of, interest in or avoidance of all things of a sexual nature
- ❖ Seductiveness/promiscuity
- ❖ Perpetrating other children
- ❖ Aspects of sexual molestation in drawing, games and fantasies
- ❖ Inappropriate dress—tight or revealing clothing or overdressing; wearing many layers of clothing regardless of weather
- ❖ Excessive masturbation
- ❖ “Riding” furniture or objects
- ❖ Touching adult genitals when being hugged or held
- ❖ Change in appetite—weight loss or gain
- ❖ Eating disorders

## **Disclosure**

If a child comes to you with a disclosure, believe him or her. Follow these steps:

- ❖ Do not conduct your own investigation.
- ❖ Do not interrogate the child.
- ❖ Do not record or videotape the child’s statements.
- ❖ Call your local children and youth, district attorney’s office, or child advocacy center.
- ❖ Let the professionals/experts conduct the investigation.
- ❖ Encourage the child to talk to the professionals.
- ❖ Write down anything the child says and let the investigators know about it.
- ❖ Give the child a lot of support and love.
- ❖ Work through the professionals to arrange a medical exam and a sexuality evaluation.
- ❖ Set up counseling for the child.
- ❖ Give the child and his or her family time to deal with all the emotions associated with potential sexual abuse.
- ❖ Let the child know he or she did the right thing by disclosing.
- ❖ Let the child know it was not his or her fault.
- ❖ Do not allow any contact with the alleged perpetrator until recommended by children and youth services and/or therapists.
- ❖ Refer every member of the family to counseling to deal with sexual-abuse issues.

*For more information, see our [article on Child Abuse](#).*