

Child Sexual Abuse-What is it?

What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse is any exploitive or coercive sexual experience involving a person under the age of 18. This may include touching or non-touching behaviors, including voyeurism, exhibitionism, pornography, fondling, intercourse, and prostitution.

Child sexual abuse often begins with seemingly innocent intrusions into a child's personal space. The offender slowly tests and "grooms" the child to accept abuse which may escalate over a period of time.

Most sexual abusers are people known and trusted by their child victims. Only 10-15 percent are strangers. Often it is hard for the child's family to believe that a beloved friend or family member has done such a thing. The hurt caused by the abuse is compounded by the trust betrayed. Further hurt is caused if those closest to the child do not believe the child when she or he discloses the abuse.

Although offenders may use physical force to perpetrate abuse, more typically rely on threats, bribery, emotional force, or simply the force of their authority over the child. Sometimes, the force is implied, rather than over.

Some examples:

Threats: "If you tell, you'll be taken to a foster home."

Bribery: "I'll let you stay up late."

Emotional Force: "I won't like you anymore."

Authority: "This is our secret—don't tell."

While physical pain may or may not be inflicted, child sexual abuse causes deep emotional pain which may be slow to heal. A survivor may carry feelings of fear, guilt, mistrust, and shame well into adulthood.