



# Sexual Abuse & Young Children

**C**hild Abuse in today's society is a very complicated issue. For those people working with children (parents, Early Childhood Educators, babysitters, etc...), recognition of possible abuse is a necessary skill.

**I**t is not the role of the person suspecting abuse to prove (or disprove) that abuse has occurred. That responsibility belongs to the workers of your local child protective service and the police.

**A**ny professional who fails to report a suspected case of abuse may face criminal charges for not reporting their suspicion.

*Definition of Sexual Abuse...*

**S**exual abuse of a child occurs if the child is inappropriately exposed to or subjected to sexual contact, activity or behavior.

**T**he sexual behavior is done for the benefit of the offender. The sexual activity may be with a child of the same sex or opposite sex.

**S**exual abuse includes oral, anal, genital, buttock and/or breast contact, or the use of objects for vaginal or anal penetration, fondling, or sexual stimulation.

**I**t also includes exploitation of the child for pornographic purposes, and making a child available to others as a child

A project of The Florida Partnership for Parent Involvement

Center of Excellence ♦ Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute ♦ Florida Children's Forum  
Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters ♦ Hillsborough County head start ♦ Hillsborough County Even Start

prostitute.

**I**nappropriate solicitation, exhibitionism, and exposure of erotic material for the purpose of stimulating a child are also considered forms of sexual abuse.

**S**exual abuse can occur within or outside the family.

**W**ithin the family, sexual abuse includes sexual activity between a parent,   
 ⇒ step-parent or parent figure,   
 ⇒ older brother or sister, or   
 ⇒ other members of the extended family, such as a grandparent, aunt, or uncle.

**O**utside the family, sexual abuse involves a person who,   
 ⇒ although often well-known by the child, does not belong

to the family unit.

**I**t is still very difficult to obtain accurate information about the incidence of sexual abuse. The most extensive information comes from the report,

**Sexual Offensives Against Children published in 1984.**

**T**he major findings of the study include:

★ One out of every 2 females and one out of 3 males will be victims of an unwanted sexual act as some time in their lives.

★ Eighty percent of assaults will occur before the person has reached the age of 18.

★ Nearly one quarter of assaults or attempted assaults on female victims occur before the child has reached the age of 11.

★ One third of sexual abuse victims are under the age of 6.

✱ Over 80 percent of the abusers are known to the child and/or family.

*Characteristics of*

*Sexual Abuse...*

**S**imilar to physical abuse, sexual abuse is not confined to a particular race, culture, social or economic class.

In about 90 percent of cases, the offenders are male. Often, they are described as...

**U**nassertive,  
**W**ithdrawn, and  
**E**motionally colorless.

*The Offender...*

**H**ere are some characteristics of the sexual offenders:

✱ personal history of physical or sexual abuse

✱ lack of control over their emotions

✱ alcohol or drug abuse  
✱ unsatisfactory sexual relationships with adults

✱ creates opportunities to be alone with a child

✱ occasionally, mental illness


*The Child's Family...*

**H**ere are some of the characteristics of the family in which sexual abuse occurs:

 socially isolated with few outside contacts

 domineering father and

 absent mother (physically or emotionally)

 the sexually abused child assumes the parenting role at an inappropriate age


 few role boundaries in the family


 parents physically or sexually abused as children


*Indicators of Possible**Sexual Abuse..*


**I**t is rare to observe obvious physical indicators. Sexually abused children, however, do share some common characteristics.


**H**ere are some of the behavioral characteristics of sexually abused children:


 developmental regression; For Example, children who can use the toilet begin to wet or soil their pants


 Nightmares, night terrors, and sleep disturbances;


 Dramatic behavioral changes causing disruption of child care activities;


 Clinging or compulsively seeking affection and attention from both boys and girls;


 Overly cooperative or aggressive; destructive or anti-social behavior;


 Apparent sadness almost all of the time;


 Poor relationships with other children and lack of self-confidence;


 Frequent lying without apparent reason;

 Self-destructive behavior; These may include biting oneself, pulling out hair, wrist-cutting

 Unusual distrust or fear of adults or specific adults;

 Unusual fears for their age; The child may fear going home, being left alone, going to child care, or particular objects.

 Unusually secretive, "special" relationship with an older person;

 Unusual sexual knowledge and persistent, inappropriate sexual play for the child's age and developmental level

**M**any of the behavioral indicators above can be

found in any situation that produces severe stress in a child, not just in sexually abused children.

If problems are observed, a careful assessment of the family and other sources of stress must be considered by appropriate, skilled professionals.

**I**t is the caregiver's responsibility to report, not investigate, any suspicions of sexual abuse. The investigation will be done by the child protection agency.

*Physical Indicators...*

**H**ere are some of the physical characteristics of sexually abused children:

✓ pain, itching or discomfort in the genitals or throat, or

✓ difficulty when having a bowel movement, urinating or swallowing;

✓ recurring complaints such as frequent stomach-aches and headaches;

✓ eating disorders; These may include refusing to eat or eating constantly

✓ torn, stained or bloody underwear or diapers;

✓ trauma to breasts, buttocks, lower abdomen, thighs, or genital, anal or rectal areas;

**W**hat to do if Sexual Abuse is Suspected...





A suspicion of sexual abuse may be based on physical or behavioral indicators, or the child may disclose sexual abuse to the caregiver.

**Y**our center should have a written





## policy for dealing with child abuse situations.

If your center does not have such a document, the following suggestions can assist you in creating one.

**H**ere are a few suggested steps caregivers can take if suspicion of sexual abuse arises:

-  If the child has an injury or complains of pain, seek immediate medical attention.
  -  Urge the parents to seek medical attention if the child has frequent discomfort, such as irritation of the genitals.
  -  Listen to the child and let the child talk if he or she wants to disclose sexual abuse. Child protection agencies encourage caregivers to listen and support the child,
- but not to ask leading questions which may interfere with the investigation process.**
-  Reassure the child that he or she is

believed. Children seldom lie about sexual abuse.

-  Do not react with the horror or anger, or encourage any belief that the alleged abuse was the child's fault; the child must not be blamed.
-  Support the child and recognize the child's feelings whether these be anger, fear, sadness, or anxiety.
-  Report to the child protection agency if the child's disclosure or indicators suggest child sexual abuse has occurred.
-  Seek the advice of the child protection worker if you are uncertain in your interpretation of the physical and behavioral indicators, and/or the explanation given by the child's parent.

This page was created and maintained by Neil Fowler, E.C.E.

Child Care Action Page

"<http://www.freenet.hamilton.on.ca/~>

For more information contact:



**The Center for Parent Involvement** (FCPI) was funded by the U.S. Department of Education; Goals 2000, Educate America Act from 1994-1999. Guided by an advisory board of parents and professionals, the FCPI's goal was to tap the power of parents.

The FCPI gathered information on parent needs, coordinated the information, and created a series of resources organized by theme, including fact sheets for parents and professionals, "Beyond the Basics" resources, and resource identification lists. Many of the resources have been translated into Spanish language versions, and every effort has been made to preserve the meaning and flavor of the original English documents. This series of materials provides a wealth of current information for both parents and providers; the complete set of resources can be obtained in PDF format on the Department of Child and Family Studies Website at [www.fmhi.usf.edu/cfs/dares/fcpi](http://www.fmhi.usf.edu/cfs/dares/fcpi). The staff of the FCPI are hopeful that their work will continue to help children get ready to learn for many years to come.

The series' themes include:

- Family Empowerment
- Parent Involvement
- Parenting Support
- School Readiness
- Violence in the Lives of Children
- Transition to Kindergarten

The Center was one component of a project led by Hillsborough County Center of Excellence in collaboration with the Department of Child & Family Studies at USF's de la Parte Institute and the Florida Children's Forum. Other project partners include HIPPIY (Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters), Hillsborough County Head Start and Hillsborough County Even Start. For more information about these projects, call 813.974.4612.

Violence & Young Children, Beyond The Basics: Sexual Abuse & Young Children

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