



UNDERSTANDING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

A guide for protective parents/guardians



CANADIAN CENTRE *for* CHILD PROTECTION®
Helping families. Protecting children.

This booklet has been created for protective parents/guardians where child sexual abuse has been discovered or is suspected. It outlines the scope of the child sexual abuse, what child sexual abuse is, how the grooming process works, impacts of the abuse, and tips for parents/guardians on how to handle disclosure.

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UNDERSTANDING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

When child sexual abuse occurs it may be hard for caregivers and families to understand how it could have taken place without them knowing. Understanding the scope of child sexual abuse, the process, and the impacts is an important part of helping families heal.

Children who have been through trauma can regain trust, confidence, hope, and the ability to create and settle into a new normal and function within it. Help them see the world as manageable, understandable, and meaningful.

TRUTHS:

- All children deserve to be loved and nurtured
- Child sexual abuse is never a child's fault
- Children need to be believed and supported
- Children are, and will be, so much more than their abuse experience

All abuse is serious – children's struggles are very real and can extend into adulthood.

FACTS:

- Abuse is a misuse of power and control
- Both girls and boys experience abuse
- Both males and females can be offenders
- Children can be abused by teenagers as well as adults
- Adults know what is right and wrong
- Abuse is always a betrayal of trust

Child sexual abuse doesn't have to be violent or happen repeatedly for a child to be impacted and need support.



Scope of Child Sexual Abuse

The sexual abuse of children is a serious problem in Canada. Most cases of child sexual abuse are not brought to the attention of professionals (doctors, educators, social workers, police).¹ There are many reasons for this lack of reporting, including the young age of the victims, the secrecy surrounding the abuse, and often the victims' associated feelings of shame.

According to researchers, understanding the true extent of child sexual abuse is complex.² It is the most hidden form of child abuse and the least likely to be disclosed by both child victims and adult survivors.

Statistics:

- Research suggests that approximately **1 in 10 children** will be sexually victimized before they turn 18.³
- 49% of all victims of sexual abuse reported to police between 2009 and 2014 were children under the age of 17, and 26% of all victims were under the age of 13.⁴
- In 80-90% of cases, the **offender is known to the child**.⁵
- Parents, including biological, adoptive, step, and foster parents, were responsible for more than half (59%) of all family-related sexual offences and physical assaults against children and youth victims in 2009.⁶

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- 1 Burczycka, M. & Conroy, S. (2017). Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, 2015. Juristat, Vol. 37, No. 1. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Cat. No. 85-002-X.
 - 2 Glaser, D., & Frosh, S. (1993). *Child sexual abuse* (2nd ed.). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
 - 3 Afifi, T. O., MacMillan, H. L., Boyle, M., Taillieu, T., Cheung, K., & Sareen, J. (2014). Child abuse and mental disorders in Canada. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 186(9): E324-32.
 - 4 Rotenberg, C. (2017). Police reported sexual assaults in Canada, 2009 to 2014: A statistical profile. *Juristat*, Vol. 37, No.1. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada. Cat. No. 85-002-X.
 - 5 Cotter, A. & Beaupré, P. (2014). Police-reported sexual offences against children and youth in Canada, 2012. *Juristat*, Vol. 34, No. 1. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada. Cat. No. 85-002-X.
 - 6 Ogrodnik, L. (2010). Child and youth victims of police-reported violent crime, 2008. *Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics profile series*. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada. Cat. 85F0033M, No.23.

- **93% of child maltreatment cases** are never brought forward to police or child welfare.⁷
- **The majority of adult survivors** of child sexual abuse report that they did not disclose the abuse to anyone when they were children.⁸

Key findings from the Canadian Centre for Child Protection's 2016 report, *Child Sexual Abuse Images on the Internet: A Cybertip.ca Analysis*, challenge the misconception that child sexual abuse material consists largely of innocent or harmless nude photographs of children. Of particular note:

- 78% of the images assessed by Cybertip.ca depicted prepubescent children under 12 years of age; and of those, 63% were under 8 years of age.
- 50% of the images depicted either explicit sexual assaults or extreme sexual assaults against children.
- 80% of the images were of girls.

7 Burczycka, M. & Conroy, S. (2017). Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, 2015. *Juristat*, Vol. 37, No. 1. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Cat. No. 85-002-X.

8 Hindman, J. (1999). *Just before dawn: From the shadows of tradition to new reflections in trauma assessment and treatment of sexual victimization*. Ontario, Oregon: AlexAndria Associates.



What is Child Sexual Abuse?

The sexual victimization of children includes a wide range of behaviours and situations:

- Offences can be non-contact sexual offences such as exposing a child to sexually explicit acts.
- Offences can be contact sexual offences such as touching or fondling the genital area.
- Offences can range from one-time occurrences to multiple experiences; from one offender to multiple offenders.
- Offences can occur with or without the use of violence.
- Offences may involve the use of technology—for example, creating child sexual abuse images by taking pictures or recording video and then sharing this content online.



The following are examples of contact and non-contact sexual abuse. These are not meant to be exhaustive.

Non-Contact Sexual Abuse:

- Encouraging a child to masturbate or watch others masturbate
- Voyeurism (secretly recording or observing a child in a private situation for a sexual purpose)
- Exposing a child to adults engaging in sexually explicit acts (including exposure to adult pornography) for a sexual purpose
- Exposing a child to child sexual abuse material*
- “Flashing” or exposing genitals to a child
- Online luring (using technology to facilitate a sexual offence)**
- Taking a picture, or recording a video of a child’s sexual organs for a sexual purpose

Contact Sexual Abuse:

- Touching or fondling genital area
- Touching or fondling breasts
- Oral sex or stimulation
- Vaginal or anal intercourse
- Vaginal or anal penetration with an object or finger

**Child sexual abuse material is photographic or video evidence of a crime scene, not to be confused with pornography. An offender may be involved in accessing, creating, possessing, and/or distributing child sexual abuse material, all of which involve the sexual abuse and/or exploitation of children. While some child sexual abuse material offences may involve a contact offence (e.g., creating child sexual abuse material at the same time the contact offence is committed), others may not (e.g., accessing child sexual abuse material).*

***Online grooming or luring generally refers to a process through which someone with a sexual interest in a child prepares them for future sexual contact. This is a process of using technology to facilitate communication in order to groom children online. This involves the manipulation of a child online to increase compliance and to sexually exploit the child. Children between the ages of 8 and 17 are targeted for online grooming. The Criminal Code of Canada also includes an offence called “luring a child” which is when someone uses telecommunications to communicate with someone they believe to be under the age of 18 years in order to facilitate committing a specified sexual offence against that child.*

The Process of Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is often a process that starts before sexual touching begins. Children who have been abused don't always realize they have been abused because they trust the adult or youth. It can be very confusing for children and families as they don't understand how relationships were manipulated to gain sexual access to the child.

Individuals known to the child and the family who abuse children often use a process called grooming. Grooming is usually a slow, gradual and escalating process of building trust and comfort with a child and the safe adults around children to eventually sexually abuse the child. The individual builds rapport with the adults around the child and establishes a legitimate purpose for their involvement with the child.

Grooming usually begins with subtle behaviours that do not appear to be inappropriate, and that may suggest that the individual is very good with children. Many victims/survivors of sexual abuse do not recognize the grooming process as it is happening, nor do they recognize that this manipulation is part of the overall abuse process.



GROOMING PROCESS

In the grooming process, the offender:

- May begin by establishing trust with adults around the child.
- Establishes an emotional connection and gains the child's trust.
- Creates an emotional dependency on the offender.
- Confuses the child into feeling as if they are equally responsible for the sexual contact.
- Discourages and prevents the child from telling anyone about what is happening.
- Makes the child feel obligated to (and, at times, protective of) the offender.

During the grooming process, the offender will often gain the child's trust by giving the child extra attention, gifts, money, or special privileges. Even though force may not be used, it is still a coerced sexual relationship and can be understood as child sexual abuse since the child cannot give informed consent. It is not surprising that the betrayal of trust that occurs during the grooming process is often one of the most devastating components of the abuse.

Children are dependent on their parents/guardians or others in positions of trust or authority for their basic needs, and as such, children will typically do whatever they perceive to be necessary to preserve that relationship, including complying with sexual abuse.

Children cannot legally consent to a sexual relationship with an adult — consent and choice only apply to relationships between peers who have the legal capacity to consent,* not between an adult and a child.

*In Canada, the age of protection (or the age at which a person is able to consent to sexual activity) is typically 16, but increases to 18 in the context of certain relationships [e.g., position of trust or authority, dependence, or exploitative relationships].

Child sexual abuse can occur by someone the child and/or family knows or by someone the child and/or family does not know.

An offender who is **known** to the child and/or family (is in a position of trust or is in the family's circle of trust) may:

- Build relationships with the adults around the child
- Find ways to spend ongoing time with the child to extend their access
- Manipulate the child by distorting their thinking and creating a dependency on the offender (grooming the child)
- Manipulate adults around the child to reduce any suspicion (grooming the adults)
- Misuse the child's trust and the trust of their family
- Provide the child with drugs or alcohol to lower inhibitions

An offender who is a **family member** may:

- Use their authority/role in the family and private access to control the child
- Take advantage of the child's dependency on them for survival⁹
- Assert their authority and domination in the home¹⁰

An offender who is **unknown** to the child and/or family may:

- Use lures such as:
 - telling the child there is an emergency
 - telling the child they need help
 - offering to give the child a gift, money, or a job
- Use threats of violence or harm to the child
- Use physical force to control the child

⁹ Herman, J.L. (2000). *Father-daughter Incest*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

¹⁰ Burczycka, M. & Conroy, S. (2017). Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, 2015. *Juristat*, Vol. 37, No. 1. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Cat. No. 85-002-X.

Impact of Child Sexual Abuse

The degree to which children internalize experiences of sexual abuse is unique to each child and is dependent on a number of factors, including:

- The nature of the abuse
- The circumstances in which the abuse occurred
- The type of relationship with the offender
- What the grooming process looked like and its duration
- Who the offender is in relationship to the child
- The child's previous life experiences
- The degree of support the child received when they disclosed (or after the abuse was discovered)
- The degree of support given to the child at home
- The child's innate resilience
- The development stage of the child



Sexual abuse can affect children’s emotional, psychological, mental, and physical well-being. Symptoms can also occur for children in high stress situations. Some symptoms may (but do not always) include:

- Learning difficulties due to changes in concentration, attention, memory, impulse control, and organization
- Emotional imbalance (e.g., extreme moods, anxiety, depression, numbness, or being zoned out)
- Difficulty forming relationships and trusting others
- Physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach aches, chronic pain)
- Change in appetite
- Disruptions in sleeping patterns (e.g., can’t sleep at night, can’t get up in morning, sleeping more during the day)
- Self-harming behaviour (e.g., cutting, drugs, alcohol, smoking, promiscuity, recklessness)
- Sensitivities to sound, touch, taste, movements, or a lack of coordination

There are strong connections between **child abuse** and **mental health conditions**.¹¹ While sexual abuse can have harmful long-term effects on a child, early detection with appropriate support and counselling may help to reduce these effects.

11 Afifi, T.O., MacMillan, H.L., Boyle, M., Taillieu, T., Cheung, K., & Sareen, J. (2014). Child abuse and mental disorders in Canada. *CMAJ : Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 186(9), E324–E332.

The Role of Technology and the Internet in Child Sexual Abuse

The role of technology in facilitating sexual offences against children has evolved and increased significantly. Today, it is commonly used to create a record of the abuse, which is referred to as child sexual abuse material.

Child sexual abuse material is any material that has been created or is used for a sexual purpose. It can be an image, a video, an audio recording, a drawing, or a written description that sexualizes a child in some manner. It often involves real children being sexually abused or posed in a sexualized way. Children of all ages, from infants and toddlers to school-age children to teens, can be depicted in child sexual abuse material.*

*Certain extreme forms of child sexual abuse material are legally termed “child pornography” and are criminalized. In Canada, this includes visual material that either shows a child engaged in explicit sexual activity or that has, as its dominant characteristic and for a sexual purpose, the depiction of a sexual organ or the anal region of a person under 18.





Technology may also be used by offenders to gain access to and communicate with children. Some offenders may:

- Send children images of sexually explicit material as a teaching tool and an attempt to normalize the activities.
- Introduce pictures and cameras as “fun play” and then progress to making requests for, or taking, sexual pictures or videos.
- Take pictures with or without the child’s knowledge. Once offenders have images/videos of the child, some use extortion to control the child, threatening to share the material unless the child produces additional sexual images/videos.

Reasons the offender may record the abuse¹²:

- As a way to silence and control the victim.
- To re-watch the content for sexual gratification.
- To share, exchange, or sell the content with/ to other offenders.

12 Canadian Centre for Child Protection. (2017). *International Survivors’ Survey: Full Report*. Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Centre for Child Protection.

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Impact of Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Abuse

When children know that their abuse has been photographed or recorded, the existence of this material creates another layer of trauma for them over and above the contact offence(s). The additional ways children can be impacted include:

- Any fear or guilt the child may feel as a result of sexual abuse may be intensified when images/videos have been taken of the abuse.
- The child may fear that the images/videos will be posted online for anyone to see, including people they know.



- How the child believes they are portrayed in the sexual abuse material may intensify their feelings of guilt or self-blame, and reduce the likelihood they will disclose. Offenders may instruct a child on how to behave/look when recording the sexual abuse (e.g., the child may be coached to smile or participate) and then manipulate the child into believing that anyone who sees the images/videos will think the child wanted it to happen.
- In online luring (use of technology to communicate to facilitate a sexual offense against a child) and extortion situations, the child is less likely to disclose sexual abuse because they feel responsible given that behaviour is often less inhibited online (children tend to engage in behaviour online that they typically wouldn't offline).

The lack of control over the ongoing sharing of their abuse images/videos and the public accessibility of those recordings can be one of the most difficult aspects of the abuse to overcome.





Discovery or Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse

When children are sexually exploited by an adult they trust, they often feel responsible for the abuse. They can harbour feelings of guilt and shame about the behaviour they engaged in, and for the attention they may have enjoyed. As such, the child fears disclosing the sexual abuse to avoid the risk of adults detecting what they “have done.”

DID YOU KNOW?

- The disclosure of child sexual abuse is often delayed — research indicates that less than 25% of children immediately disclose being sexually assaulted.¹³
- Children often avoid telling someone about sexual abuse because they are afraid they won't be believed and are worried about what a disclosure may do to their family and the offender.
- Those who have experienced child sexual abuse may minimize what has happened, or not remember all of the details about what happened.

It is important for adults to allow the child to feel in control of their disclosure in order to avoid reinforcing any feelings of helplessness.

13 Tashjian, S. M., Goldfarb, D., Goodman, G. S., Quas, J. A., & Edelstein, R. (2016). Delay in disclosure of non-parental child sexual abuse in the context of emotional and physical maltreatment: A pilot study. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 58, 149-59.

WHEN ABUSE IS DISCOVERED OR DISCLOSED

When abuse is discovered or when a child discloses, the child may not share everything that happened to them. They may share bits of information to test how adults respond and to see whether or not they are believed. They may not want to share some information as they feel too much shame, they may not be able to share everything that has happened to them at that time, or they may not remember.

HOW TO RESPOND TO A CHILD'S DISCLOSURE

While it is upsetting to learn that a child is being/has been sexually abused, the appropriate reaction of the adult is critical as it affects the severity of the child's overall trauma. Research shows that children who feel supported, nurtured, safe and believed when disclosing abuse have the most success in recovery and future adjustment.¹⁴

Children who have been abused may need to be reassured that they are not "damaged" people as a result of suffering abuse, but rather that they have already coped and survived, and they can overcome the experience and live a fulfilling life.

It is important for children who have been abused to feel believed, loved, and supported, and to know they are not alone in getting through this tough time. For more information about responding to a child's disclosure, see *Child Sexual Abuse: Picking up the Pieces*.



14 Alaggia, R., Collin-Vézina, D., & Lateef, R. (2017). Facilitators and barriers to child sexual abuse (CSA) disclosures: A research update (2000–2016). *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 1–24.



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OTHER RESOURCES IN THIS SERIES:



CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: PICKING UP THE PIECES: This booklet addresses how parents/guardians may feel after abuse is discovered and what their child may be experiencing emotionally, as well as practical and tangible steps parents/guardians can take to support their child and get support for themselves as a parent/guardian. It addresses some common questions and concerns we hear from parents/guardians, such as how to deal with their child's feelings toward the offender and how to manage their child's day-to-day healing process. It also includes information about the added layer of complexity when sexual abuse has been recorded and potentially shared online.



SAFEGUARDING YOUR CHILD: This booklet builds on *Child Sexual Abuse: Picking up the Pieces* and helps parents/guardians continue on the healing journey, addressing issues that may present as their child gets older. This includes rebuilding personal boundaries, addressing concerns surrounding supervision, considering their child's digital presence as they grow up, and providing a basic understanding of child development to help parents/guardians determine if sexualized behaviours are problematic or age appropriate.



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