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CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

IT IS YOUR BUSINESS



CANADIAN CENTRE *for* CHILD PROTECTION®
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CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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IN ORDER TO PROTECT CHILDREN FROM SEXUAL ABUSE, IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IT IS, HOW IT HAPPENS AND HOW TO RECOGNIZE BEHAVIOUR THAT MAY SIGNAL A CHILD IS IN DISTRESS.

Child sexual abuse is a serious problem within our society and occurs more frequently than people realize. According to Statistics Canada, 59% of all victims of sexual abuse reported to police in 2009 were children under the age of 18 years.¹ Of those, 40% were children 11 years of age or under. In order to protect children, it is important to understand what child sexual abuse is, how it happens and how to recognize behaviour that may signal a child is in distress.

Broadening our understanding of how technology is used to facilitate child sexual abuse and the proliferation of child pornography on the Internet also needs to be considered.

Child Sexual Abuse Education — A National Priority

In November 2009, the Canadian Centre for Child Protection released a report titled *Child Sexual Abuse Images: An Analysis of Websites* by Cybertip.ca. This report reinforced concerns regarding the scope and severity of child sexual abuse imagery. Some of the report's key findings include:

- More than 82% of the images assessed by Cybertip.ca depicted very young, pre-pubescent children under 12 years of age;
- 57% of images were of children under 8 years of age;
- More than 35% of all images showed serious sexual assaults; and
- 83% of the images were of girl children.

The report underscores the critical need for child sexual abuse education. Children need to learn about personal safety and to tell a safe adult if they are being abused or photographed inappropriately.

¹Statistics Canada. (2011). *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Industry.

WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

Child sexual abuse includes a range of behaviours from obvious contact offences such as touching or fondling a child's genitalia, to the less obvious non-contact offences which include exposing a child to sexually explicit material. Children can experience sexual abuse and trauma without a contact offence occurring. The following are examples of contact and non-contact sexual abuse.

Non-contact sexual abuse

- Exposing a child to sexually explicit material
- Luring a child online for sexual purposes
- Inviting a child to sexual touching online and/or offline
- Voyeurism ("Peeping Tom")
- Child pornography *
- Asking sexually intrusive questions or making sexually explicit comments to a child
- Encouraging or forcing a child to masturbate or watch others masturbate
- Exposing a child to sexually explicit acts
- "Flashing" or exposing genitals to a child

** Child pornography deals with child abuse imagery and material. An offender may be involved in creating, possessing, making available and/or distributing child pornography, all of which involve the sexual abuse and/or exploitation of children.*

Contact sexual abuse

- Touching or fondling a child's genital area
- Touching or fondling a child's breasts
- Encouraging or forcing a child to touch another's genital area
- Oral sex with a child
- Vaginal or anal intercourse with a child
- Vaginal or anal penetration of a child with object or finger

This list is not meant to be exhaustive.

FOR PARENTS

How can risks be reduced?

- **TEACH** your child about personal safety. Visit kidsintheknow.ca for more information.
- **LEARN** about online risks to children and youth. Visit thedoorthatsnotlocked.ca for more information.
- **BE INVOLVED** in your child's life. Attend her/his activities and pay attention to the interactions between the adults and the children.
- **BE VIGILANT** of situations and behaviours that seem to be strange or present risk.
- **SCREEN AND CHECK** child protection policies at organizations and activities that your child attends. Visit commit2kids.ca for more information.
- **SUPERVISE** your child. Know her/his whereabouts.
- **ACCOMPANY** your child to public areas (i.e. washrooms, stores, etc.) and to extracurricular activities.
- **COMMUNICATE** with your child and create opportunities for her/him to share her/his feelings/stories/opinions/perspective with you.
- **USE THE CORRECT TERMS** for body parts when talking with your child. Explain to your child that it is not okay for anybody to touch her/his private parts and that secrets about touching are not okay ("unsafe" can be used with children 6 years of age and older). Encourage her/him to always tell you about any touching or secrets that are not okay/unsafe.
- **MODEL** appropriate boundaries between adults and children. Discuss with your child the role of adults (i.e. to protect and look out for the best interests of a child).
- **PAY ATTENTION AND REPORT** adults who repeatedly break boundaries and engage in inappropriate behaviour with children.
- **BE EMOTIONALLY AVAILABLE** for your child. Let her/him know that you notice if s/he is "out of sorts," or not her/himself. Ask the question, "Is there anything I can help you with?" Let your child know that you are available when s/he is ready to talk.

WHAT IS CONCERNING BEHAVIOUR?

(particularly with regard to children 12 years old and under)

It is important to pay attention to changes in a child's behaviour as children communicate how they are feeling through their behaviour. If you notice a child exhibiting any of the below behaviours, do not automatically conclude that s/he has been victimized — this may be one of several possibilities. Rather, provide support and assistance to help determine what is causing the child's symptoms of distress.

- 1. Advanced sexual knowledge:** The child has sexual knowledge beyond her/his level of development. This may include information about certain smells, sounds, tastes, and/or visual details of sexual activity.
- 2. Sexualized behaviour:** The child acts out explicit sexual behaviour. The behaviour is inconsistent with behaviour of children the same age. Other children and adults are complaining about the behaviour. This behaviour could be with toys, peers or adults.
- 3. Withdrawn/depressed:** The child becomes increasingly withdrawn. S/he resists playing with her/his usual friends and withdraws from activities previously enjoyed.
- 4. Clingy:** The child becomes extremely clingy. S/he resists doing anything independently.
- 5. Decline in school performance:** The child's performance at school declines and her/his grades drop.
- 6. Distressed around a particular adult:** The child shows distress or resistance to spending time with a particular adult.
- 7. Excessively seeks time with a particular adult:** The child excessively seeks time with a specific adult, as s/he is given extra attention, gifts or privileges by this particular adult.
- 8. Aggressive:** The child seems agitated and acts out aggressively towards others (e.g. yelling, hitting, putting others down).
- 9. Self-destructive:** The child is physically harming her/himself and sharing feelings indicating a lack of self-worth (e.g. "I wish I was dead," "I should not be alive," "What's the point in living?").
- 10. Physical symptoms:** The child shows physical signs of abuse in the genital region (e.g. pain, bleeding, discharge).
- 11. Disrupted sleep patterns:** The child's sleep patterns suddenly change, such as: difficulty falling asleep; staying asleep; and/or experiencing nightmares or night terrors.



It is important to note that changes in a child's behaviour should be further explored, regardless of whether or not sexual abuse is suspected to be the reason.



UNDERSTANDING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

WHO SEXUALLY ABUSES CHILDREN?

Research reveals that individuals who sexually abuse children usually know their victims. This includes family members or someone in the family's circle of trust (e.g. a family friend, an educator, or a coach). Offenders come from all walks of life and cannot be picked out or identified by appearance. It is essential to pay attention to behaviours and situations that present risk rather than focusing on an individual's character.

SEXUAL ABUSE IS A PROCESS. IT OFTEN BEGINS BEFORE SEXUAL TOUCHING STARTS.

GROOMING

Grooming is a method used by offenders of building trust with a child and the adults around a child in an effort to gain access to and time alone with her/him. However, in extreme cases, offenders may use threats and physical force to sexually assault or abuse a child. More common, though, are subtle approaches designed to build relationships with families. The offender may assume a caring role, befriend the child, or even exploit their position of trust and authority to groom the child and/or the child's family. These individuals intentionally build relationships with the adults around a child or seek out a child who is less supervised by adults in her/his life. This increases the likelihood that the offender's time with the child is welcomed and encouraged.

The purpose of grooming is:

- To manipulate the child into becoming a co-operating participant which reduces the likelihood of a disclosure and increases the likelihood that the child will repeatedly return to the offender.
- To reduce the likelihood of the child being believed.
- To reduce the likelihood of being detected.
- To manipulate the perceptions of other adults around the child.

GROOMING BEHAVIOUR

Although not all child sexual abuse involves grooming, it is a common process used by offenders. It usually begins with subtle behaviour that may not initially appear to be inappropriate, such as paying a lot of attention to a child or being very affectionate. Many victims of grooming and sexual abuse do not recognize they are being manipulated, nor do they realize how grooming is a part of the abuse process.



If something doesn't seem quite right, trust your instincts.



“There is no checklist for sex offenders.”

(Salter, 2003)

Concerning adult behaviour to pay attention to:

- Repeated use of poor judgment when interacting with children
- Normalizing or minimizing inappropriate interactions with children
- Distorting relationships with children (i.e. adults using children to meet their own emotional needs)
- Frequently initiating or creating opportunities to have exclusive time alone with a child (or certain children)
- Making others feel uncomfortable by ignoring social, emotional, or physical boundaries or limits with children
- Refusing to let a child set her/his own limits (i.e. may use teasing or belittling language to keep a child from setting limits)
- Excessive touching, hugging, kissing, tickling, wrestling with or holding children even when a child does not want this physical contact or attention
- Frequently making sexual references or telling sexual or suggestive jokes with children present
- Exposing children to adult sexual interactions without apparent concern
- Encouraging children to behave sexually towards each other
- Giving “special” attention to certain children
- Displaying favouritism towards certain children
- Displaying preferences for children of a certain age and gender

Activities that can be sexually arousing to adults who have a sexual interest in children or that are used as part of a grooming process may include:

- Excessively washing a child
- Deliberately walking in on a child changing
- Deliberately walking in on a child toileting
- Asking a child to watch the adult toileting
- Tickling and “accidentally” touching genitalia
- Activities that involve removing clothes (e.g. massaging, swimming, wrestling)
- Playing games that include touching genitalia (e.g. measuring games)
- Telling sexually explicit jokes to a child or in the presence of a child
- Teasing a child about breast and genital development
- Discussing sexually explicit information under the guise of education
- Taking pictures of children in underwear, bathing suits, dance wear, etc

RESPONDING TO “ODD” INTERACTIONS

If interactions between a child and an adult seem inappropriate, remember to carefully and objectively review the behaviour as opposed to making assumptions. Consider the following:

- 1. Use your instincts as a guide.** Ask yourself whether or not a reasonable observer would feel comfortable witnessing the behaviour. Consider the context — is the behaviour an appropriate response to the child’s needs, or does it fall outside those guidelines? Does the behaviour seem inappropriate for the situation and the age of the child?

EXAMPLES


Appropriate behaviour: An educator who rubs a Grade 1 student’s back to console him after falling and hurting himself on the playground.

Inappropriate behaviour: A soccer coach who rubs a 16-year-old’s back while she is on the sidelines waiting to go into the game and persists even when the teen gestures for him to stop.

Ask yourself:

- Does the interaction between the child and the adult seem odd?
- Is the child singled out and favoured by the adult?
- Does it make you or the child feel uncomfortable?
- Does the adult exhibit odd behaviour frequently?
- Has anyone else made a comment about or noticed the adult’s odd interaction with the child?

Children with special needs: With some children, certain behaviours may be appropriate as they may be used to calm the child (such as rubbing the child’s back), which would therefore be responding to the child’s needs. These behaviours should be formalized as part of an individualized plan for that particular child.



THE FOCUS SHOULD BE ON THE BEHAVIOUR, NOT ON THE PERSON.

- 2. Control your reaction.** Children look to an adult’s response in these situations. It is important to act appropriately. Remain calm and focus on the child’s needs.
- 3. Determine how the child feels about the behaviour.** Find out whether the child feels uncomfortable, scared, or confused. Keep in mind that the child may not reveal her/his true feelings for a variety of reasons including: to avoid causing trouble; to protect the individual; out of embarrassment or shame; or s/he may enjoy the attention, etc.
- 4. Do not dismiss your concerns.** A child may not see any issues or reasons for concern. However, that does not mean that your concerns are misguided. Once again, trust your instincts.
- 5. Take action.** Report the questionable behaviour to the organization the individual works for or volunteers for, and/or to the appropriate authorities.

Note: This does not apply when you suspect there is child sexual abuse. In this case, a child welfare agency needs to be notified.



MYTHS

Offenders always force children into sexual activity.

Most offenders are strangers.

All offenders were sexually abused as children.

All offenders look creepy and weird.

Nice people who like and help children would never sexually abuse them.

FACTS

Adults who sexually abuse children usually know the child in some capacity.

There is a much higher percentage of males than females sexually offending against children.

Adults who sexually abuse children can also be in adult sexual relationships.

Offenders may test a child's boundaries in front of other adults such as "accidentally" touching them in private areas while rubbing their backs, tickling, wrestling, etc.

Sexual abuse that does not include physical contact can still have a psychological and emotional impact on victims.

Some offenders start engaging in offending behaviour during adolescence.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING CHILDREN PERSONAL SAFETY

Some offenders will test a child's personal safety awareness and whether or not there is a risk that the child will tell an adult.

Offenders are less likely to victimize a child if they think the child will tell. Teach children about personal safety strategies (see the *Seven Root Safety Strategies* which can be found on the Kids in the Know website: kidsintheknow.ca).

DISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL ABUSE

While it's difficult to think of a child having to come forward and disclose sexual abuse, it is important that adults are appropriately prepared to respond. The likelihood of receiving a disclosure from a child abuse victim can hinge upon the behaviour of the protective adult figure in her/his life. A willingness to disclose abuse will greatly increase if the child victim senses that the adult is capable of managing the sensitive information.

Disclosure has often been described or portrayed as a one-time event. Although that can occur, the fact is that most disclosures span days, months, or years. If the disclosure process is interrupted by a negative experience on the part of the child disclosing (such as a negative reaction from the protective adult figure in her/his life), the child may discontinue the disclosure.

ASK YOURSELF THE FOLLOWING

What can you teach a child in order to increase the likelihood s/he will disclose an experience of sexual abuse?

Would you know if a child was trying to disclose?

What do you think a disclosure would sound or look like?

How would you respond?

CHILDREN NEED TO KNOW:

- Secrets about touching are not okay.
- Secrets about having their picture taken are not okay.
- Sexual attention from an adult is not okay.

MYTHS

If a child is sexually abused s/he will immediately tell a safe adult in her/his life.

Child abuse victims are more likely to disclose if directly questioned by their parent or an adult authority figure who can help.

Disclosure is always a one-time event.

FACTS

Disclosure of sexual abuse is often delayed; research indicates that only 30% of child abuse victims disclose during childhood (Hon. Sydney Robins, 2000). Child abuse victims often avoid telling because they are either afraid of a negative reaction from their parents or of being harmed by the abuser. As such, they often delay disclosure until adulthood.

Child victims do not always realize that what they have experienced constitutes abuse.

Disclosures often unfold gradually, and may be presented in a series of hints.

Child abuse victims might imply something has happened to them without directly stating they were sexually abused — they may be testing the reaction to their "hint."

If they are ready, child abuse victims may then follow with a larger hint if they think it will be handled well.

HOW DO I KNOW IF A CHILD IS DISCLOSING?

HINTS OF DISCLOSURE

What disclosure from a child might sound like:

- “What do you think of _____?”
- “_____ is mean.”
- “_____ does not pay attention to me anymore.”
- “_____ likes boys better than girls.”
- “I don’t want to go to _____’s house anymore.”
- “I don’t like _____ anymore.”
- “Please don’t go! Please don’t leave me with _____.”
(Child desperately tries to avoid being left alone with a certain individual)
- “I don’t like it when you’re gone.”
- “I feel uncomfortable when you aren’t here.”
- “I’m not comfortable with _____.”
- “I’m bad.”
- “You’ll be mad at me.”
- “_____ gets mad a lot.”
- “_____ did things to me.”
- “_____ does bad stuff to me that I don’t like.”
- “_____ plays games with me that I don’t like.”

What disclosure from a child might look like:

- Freezing emotions — not showing emotion
- Excessive sadness and worry
- Extreme aggressiveness and risk-taking behaviour
- Sudden resistance to being alone with a person whose company s/he previously enjoyed

Don’t immediately conclude that behavioural changes are because of sexual abuse — this is only one of many possibilities.

WHY A CHILD MIGHT NOT TELL

A child abuse victim will often delay disclosure or not disclose if s/he:

- Feels s/he will not be believed.
- Has been manipulated and groomed by the offender and feels like a participant in the abuse.
- Has either been threatened with violence, or there is a threat of violence against her/his family, friends, or pets.
- Does not want to lose perceived benefits (e.g. gifts, status or playing time on a sports team, academic recognition, etc.)
- Believes that s/he is receiving love and acceptance from the offender.
- Fears judgment.
- Does not think s/he has a safe adult to tell.
- Feels shame and embarrassment.
- Fears her/his life will change dramatically (i.e. loss or breakup of family).
- Does not recognize that s/he has been victimized.
- Has not been believed when disclosing previously.

HOW TO SUPPORT CHILDREN DURING A DISCLOSURE

Listen

What a child needs when disclosing is for you to listen. S/he fears an adult's reaction as well as not being believed. It takes incredible courage to share such an experience. Listen attentively.

Control Your Reaction

Do not over- or underreact. Be aware of your facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice — the child will be sensitive to your reaction. A child can pick up on differences between what an adult is saying and how s/he is acting. If body language and verbal language do not match, the child will feel confused.

Do Not Correct Language

A child who has been sexually abused often uses slang or distasteful words for genitals and sexual acts. You should not educate a child about correct terms during a disclosure — doing so could make the child feel judged, and might prevent the child from continuing to disclose. Also, be careful not to repackage what the child is saying or to make assumptions about what has happened, in order to not, inadvertently, create an additional layer of shame and/or guilt for the child.

Take it Seriously

Let the child know that what s/he is telling you is very important to you. Explain to the child that you are going to listen very carefully to what s/he has to share with you.

Praise the Child for Telling

It takes tremendous courage to disclose sexual abuse and a child will often assume responsibility for the abuse. Assure the child that it is not her/his fault, and that s/he did the right thing by disclosing.

Protect the Child and Other Children from Overexposure

Respect the child's need for privacy and confidentiality, and make sure that no other children are around to hear the child's disclosure. Only adults who will be directly involved in taking action should be present.

Show Warmth and Caring

Use a calm voice and get down to the child's level in order to make eye contact with the child. A child who discloses needs appropriate support and understanding.

Avoid Making Promises

Tell the child that you will take quick action to stop the abuse. Avoid making promises about matters that you have no control over (e.g. "I will make sure the offender goes to jail.").

(Cooper, 2008 and Gil, 1988)



**DISCLOSURE IS
TYPICALLY MORE A
PROCESS THAN A
ONE TIME EVENT.**

How to Respond to a Child's Disclosure

- Research shows that a child who feels supported, nurtured and safe when disclosing abuse has the most successful chance of recovery and future adjustment.
- A child who has been abused needs to understand that what happened was not her/his fault, and that s/he is not alone.

While it is upsetting to hear a child disclose, the child's needs must come first. Appropriate reactions to a child's disclosure of sexual abuse are critical, as they affect the severity of her/his overall trauma.

[Finkelhor, 1984]

Denial

It's not uncommon for children to deny that abuse took place, even after making a disclosure. This is especially the case if the child is questioned by an adult authority figure. It is important for adults to understand that children are often hesitant, and may seem confused or uncertain during a disclosure. Adults must be careful not to disregard a child's possible disclosure just because it appears vague or inconsistent, or fluctuates and/or seems unbelievable. If s/he denies abuse took place, or appears hesitant and/or unclear, don't assume that the child doesn't need adult assistance.



How to Increase the Likelihood You Would Recognize a Disclosure of Sexual Abuse from a Child Should it Happen:

- Increase your overall awareness about what child sexual abuse is, how it happens and how to recognize behaviour that may signal a child is in distress.
- Increase children's awareness about personal safety using developmentally appropriate educational material (see kidsintheknow.ca for details).
- Nurture a consistent, positive relationship with children.
- Listen to and appreciate children's feelings, hopes and fears, and make sure children know you are available to listen and help.
- Notice and respond to changes in children's typical behaviour.
- Increase children's awareness of appropriate boundaries.

REPORTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: TAKING ACTION

Adults have the legal obligation to report any allegations or suspicions of abuse. Individuals who have any information that a child is or might be in need of protection must report it to a child welfare agency.

Individuals are responsible for reporting concerns (not proving abuse) and allowing the appropriate authorities to determine whether or not it is necessary to investigate the allegations. The purpose of the legislation is to remove any personal or professional dilemma in reporting.

Minimizing or denying what appears to be a disclosure is not uncommon. Concerns often revolve around worrying about interfering, being wrong, and causing problems for the family or the accused. Remember, child sexual abuse can be reduced through the action of protective adults, and you have a legal obligation to report your suspicions.

REPORTING CONCERNING BEHAVIOUR: TAKING ACTION

If you observe or hear about concerning behaviour or a situation between an adult and a child that does not hit the threshold to suspect abuse but is inappropriate and questionable, report your concerns. If the individual has contact with the child through a child-serving organization, report your concerns to the organization. If the individual has contact in another capacity, report your concerns to the parents and/or the appropriate authorities.



Following Disclosure, Support the Child by Providing:

STRUCTURE

Keep activities and routines the same. Structure and familiarity will offer security to the child.

CONNECTION

Let the child know you care by communicating openly and frequently with her/him. Check in with the child regularly to see how s/he is doing.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Make sure that the disclosure and information about the abuse is limited to those who need to know, and that those people are not openly discussing what happened.

BOUNDARIES

Re-establish boundaries if the child acts out. Redefining appropriate behaviour with limits will provide security for the child.

**APPROPRIATE REACTIONS
TO A CHILD'S DISCLOSURE
OF SEXUAL ABUSE ARE
CRITICAL, AS THEY AFFECT
THE SEVERITY OF HER/HIS
OVERALL TRAUMA.
[FINKELHOR, 1984]**



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The Canadian Centre for Child Protection is a charitable organization dedicated to the personal safety of all children. Our goal is to reduce child victimization by providing programs and services to Canadians. We do this through public awareness activities, as well as through our personal safety education program, **Kids in the Know** ([kidsintheknow.ca](https://www.kidsintheknow.ca)), our national tipline to report the online sexual abuse of children, **Cybertip.ca** ([cybertip.ca](https://www.cybertip.ca)), our program to help organizations prevent child sexual abuse, **Commit to Kids** ([commit2kids.ca](https://www.commit2kids.ca)), and our new national missing children resource centre, **MissingKids.ca** ([missingkids.ca](https://www.missingkids.ca)).

