

Resiliency

Benefits of treatment for Sexual Abuse

Many factors have been shown to support the healing of sexual abuse victims. Most importantly, children benefit from warm, safe, and supportive family environments with minimal stress and family conflicts. Victims also need to increase their coping skills and to restore trust in themselves, other people, and in the future. Children who have been abused also heal better when they experience successes in school, friendships, and other interests.

Resiliency

If your child has experienced abuse and is showing difficulties in his or her behaviors and/or mood, it is extremely important to seek professional help. Victimized children need to develop trusting relationships with non-judgmental adults who know about the impact of abuse. A professional therapist should treat the specific needs of your child and family and educate you about your child's symptoms and needs. Family therapy is very useful in overcoming sexual abuse, and a professional may want to work with some or all of your family to create a helpful, healing environment for the victim in the home.

Overcoming obstacles



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Recovery

What if a traumatized child denies the abuse?

Safety

At times, children deny that they have been abused even though they may show significant changes in mood and behavior. It is very important to respond to these changes by ensuring the child's current and future safety and by encouraging open communication with your child. It is also a good idea to seek an evaluation by a mental health professional so that you will better understand your child's symptoms.

Where to get help

Speak with your child's pediatrician or your local mental health center in order to find a professional who specializes in childhood/adolescent development and the treatment of sexual abuse.

Safety

Overcoming obstacles



Recovery

Coping

Overcoming obstacles

Resiliency

Safety

Recovery

What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse happens when one person (a "perpetrator") mistreats another (a "victim") by means of sexual exploitation, pornography, exposure, or sexual contact. Sexual behaviors are "abusive" when they are out of the victim's control, involve emotional and/or physical force, are used to meet the needs or desires of the perpetrator, or when the perpetrator has more knowledge, strength, or authority than the victim. Victims of sexual abuse sometimes experience a combination of symptoms known as "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder" or PTSD. These symptoms include:

Sleep Disturbance
nightmares, problems sleeping

Flashbacks
images of the event(s) that the child cannot stop

Anxiety
panic reactions, separation anxiety, general nervousness

Fear
of potential danger in usual, everyday activities

Setbacks
in age-appropriate activities and skills

Withdrawal
from pleasurable activities

Personality Changes

Complaints
of aches and pains

Impact of Sexual Abuse

Victims of sexual abuse experience disruptions in safety, trust, power, and self-esteem. These disruptions effect:

- relationships: victims may be hesitant, distant, and distrustful of others
- self-control: victims may behave in violent, impulsive, and sexualized ways
- self-image: victims often develop poor self-esteem and feel guilty and ashamed of the abuse.
- some victims also develop a poor body image and may be at risk for eating disorders.

Sexual abuse is particularly damaging for child victims because they are not mature enough to understand sexual interactions. Young children are also less likely to report the abuse and to get help. Child victims often feel betrayed by a person of trust and power, especially if the perpetrator is a family member or a close acquaintance. The effects of the abuse depend on the type of abuse that occurred, the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, and the number of abusive incidents. The effects also vary with the age, developmental level, and maturity level of the child.

Sexual abuse is a very serious problem

Sexually victimized children are 4 times more likely to have mental health problems than other children are. Drug and alcohol abuse is 3 times more likely in people who have been abused than in non-victims.¹ Repeated studies also show that abused children are more likely to abuse others when they grow up. Even if they are not abusive, sexually victimized children may also show problematic sexual behaviors and act out sexually in an age-inappropriate way.

Sexual abuse of children and adolescents happens with alarming frequency. Over the last half-century, more and more cases of sexual abuse have been reported each year, reflecting the increasing awareness of this epidemic and of the long-term damage that sexual abuse can cause. Unfortunately, there are likely many more cases of sexual abuse that are never reported due to the secretive and shaming nature of the events. Victims who do not report their abuse are much more likely to suffer negative long-term consequences than those who get help.

References:

¹Finkelhor, D. Dziuba, J. (1994) Victimization of children. American Psychologist 49(3), 173-183.