

Childhood Sexual Abuse & Incest

The legacy of childhood sexual abuse can be devastating and often makes itself felt years after the abuse itself has stopped. If you're wondering whether something that happened such a long time ago could be the cause of problems you're experiencing now, you could be right. If someone else has suggested this to you, it can be very hard to accept, but they too could be right.

Child sexual abuse is a profound violation. It affects every part of a developing young person's life. Even if you were able to separate it in your mind from other parts of who you were at the time, it was and probably still is affecting you deeply. The lies told or implied by the abuser damage a child's sense of reality and their whole view of the world. They especially damage the child's sense of self, confidence and self-esteem which can have far-reaching implications for the adult survivor, affecting future relationships, career choices, health and happiness.

If you are reading this leaflet, you have already taken the first step. Survivors of childhood sexual abuse with many years of experience helping others have written it to help you. It aims to provide you with information, support and encouragement to commence your own healing and offer practical advice about the next steps you could take on your path to recovery.

Adults who were sexually abused as children often find they have a host of difficulties which may seem totally unrelated. Depression, migraines, smoking, chronic illness, eating disorders, problems with sex and intimacy, substance abuse, are all statistically more common amongst people who were sexually abused in childhood.

Statistically, survivors are more likely to spend time in prison and less likely to achieve their full earning potential. They often find themselves in dangerous situations again and again as if some basic safety skills are missing. They may turn to self-harm as they try to find some relief from the intolerable pain.

These facts aren't intended to frighten you, or even to justify your current circumstances. They are intended to help you take your past abuse seriously, to start to fully grasp what was taken from you and to know what you could regain from healing. It's never too late to make a big difference to your life.

The healing process gradually cuts away the lies that became part of us and may have crippled us with self-hate. It teaches us to trust and love ourselves and to interact with others more safely and satisfyingly.

Exploring the issue of child sexual abuse is never easy. Even though we know it happens, most people would prefer not to think about it. If you were sexually abused yourself, you may be only too aware of this. You've probably already come across people, even friends or counsellors who didn't want to know, didn't understand or didn't believe your experiences. But things are changing, nowadays it is easier to find people to talk to and seek support to resolve its effects on you.

Child sexual abuse is a lot more common than many think. Statistics suggest that one in four girls and one in eight boys will have been sexually abused by the time they are eighteen years old. In most cases the abuser is known by the child. A girl is almost 10 times more likely to be abused in her own home, school or club, than by a stranger. For a boy, the ratio is smaller, but nonetheless most are abused by someone known and trusted and needed by them.

In such circumstances the only way any child can survive emotionally and psychologically is to blame his or herself. Children depend on adults for love, care and protection and instinctively know that their survival depends on these bigger people. They protect them to save themselves. Given the choice of whether they, as children, or their parents are at fault, they choose themselves. They are then able to believe things like: 'I caused this to happen. I must be dirty, unlovable and bad for that to happen to me'.

Abused children do this to maintain an attachment on which they depend. They may do it to feel safe or to keep hope alive. For a child to know the truth namely that the big people in their lives are dangerous and that while with them there is no hope, is too frightening to even contemplate. As an adult, these safety and attachment issues are likely to remain active. Evidence for this may be that you have been told that the abuse was not your fault but you still FEEL that it was. Further evidence might be that you still feel protective towards those who abused you or failed to protect you. Part of your healing process will be to carefully resolve these issues, otherwise they are likely to slow down or obstruct therapy.

Many children blame themselves for letting abuse happen or for not being able to stop it. This can be especially hard to deal with if the abuse began or continued in the teenage years or later, but these circumstances are very common. A pattern set up in childhood can be very hard to break later on. Even adults who have experienced a fairly good, non-abusive childhood can find it hard to stand up to their parents and say 'No'.

Abuse is a demonstration of power by an abuser over the victim. Whatever the age differential and sometimes even in situations where the abuser is younger, he or she had power over you. This may have been because of physical size or strength or it may have been that they were psychologically stronger. The power dynamic in abuse applies in many situations but is most commonly found between adults and children. Your abuser used their power, possibly in devious or hidden ways to take advantage of you. This is a universal truth about child abuse and it will apply to your experiences.

Sometimes one of the most difficult things to deal with is any physical or emotional pleasure you may have felt. There are often elements of sexual abuse that feel physically pleasurable at the time. Genital stimulation, even for a child, can feel pleasurable. From a very young age we all have sensitive nerve endings in our genitalia and when stimulated in the right way it feels pleasurable. This is normal and only shows that your body was working as it was meant to. It does not mean you wanted the abuse, or that you enjoyed it whatever the abuser told you. Likewise, it may be enjoyable emotionally; to feel that you are important to an older person who you love is what all children desire.

Sexual abusers will often say and do anything to get their way. In many cases this involves making the victim feel special. This is known as 'grooming'. Many of us were groomed to create a relationship in which we could be abused, or to enable the abuse to continue. We may have received treats, hugs, or even money. We may have been told the abuser loved us and in many cases the abuse was part of an otherwise loving relationship. All of this is a deliberate strategy by abusers who know that in the long term it is likely to cause continuing feelings of confusion, guilt and shame in their victim/s. It acts to protect the abuser by making it less likely that a victim will disclose or challenge them.

For other victims, sexual abuse is disguised and acted out by abusers as a form of justified punishment. As a child, you may have experienced highly critical, scapegoating parents who twisted reality to depict you as wrong and bad and in need of punishment; you may have lived in a constant state of anxiety. Whatever justification your abuser may have used or implied there is never an excuse or good reason to abuse a child.

At the moment you may not even know how you feel a lot of the time, let alone listen to your own inner wisdom. In time and with help, you will gain insights into your feelings, your past and your present. You can learn to love and understand yourself. You can find out who you really are and become your own strong assertive guide. You have already taken the first courageous step and no matter how hard the road is, you are on your way.

Help is available. Sometimes it can be hard to find but the situation is improving. There are more trained counsellors and resources. For people who already feel isolated and different it is easy to think: "Yes, but it does not apply to me". In fact, it probably does – Do not talk yourself out of what you need and deserve to have.

See Childhood Sexual Abuse in the DABS Directory Book List section