

Child Abuse; How to Help Victims

Introduction

Child abuse has devastating consequences for victims. Child abusers inflict physical, sexual, and emotional trauma on defenseless children every day. The scars can be deep and long-lasting. As well, the more subtle forms of child abuse such as neglect and emotional abuse can be just as traumatizing as violent physical abuse.

Child abuse is a prevalent problem all over the world, and Canada is no exception. According to the *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect*, there were 103,297 substantiated cases in 2003 across Canada (excluding Quebec), a 125% increase in documented child abuse since 1998. This increase is considered a result of improvements in reporting and investigative methods for child abuse, as well as enhanced awareness and understanding of child abuse, not necessarily an increase in the amount of abuse. However, it is also true that technology has created new opportunities to abuse or exploit children and young people, i.e. child pornography.

Children have the right to grow up free from abuse and all Canadians have a duty to ensure this happens. That is why in Canada, reporting of child abuse is mandatory for everyone under the child welfare statute of each province and territory.¹ Although the reporting rate is growing, many studies show that actual rates of child abuse may be much higher than those reported because the victims are children and they may lack the understanding or ability to report.

What is child abuse?

According to the Department of Justice Canada, the term "child abuse" refers to the violence, mistreatment or neglect that a child or adolescent may experience while in the care of someone they either trust or depend on, such as a parent, sibling, other relative, caregiver or guardian. The *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect* (2003) divided child abuse into five categories; physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and exposure to domestic violence. Definitions for each category are described below.

Physical Abuse: Physical abuse involves deliberately using force against a child in such a way that the child is either injured or is at risk of being injured. It may consist of just

¹ Child welfare statute of each province and territory have different title; B.C., *Children, Family and Community Service Act*, A.B., *Child Welfare Act*, S.K., M.B., N.T., N.U., and O.N., *Child and Family Services Act*, Y.K., *Children's Act*, N.F.L., *Child, Youth and Family Services Act*, P.E.I., *Child Protection Act*, N.S., *Children and Family Services Act*, N.B., *Family Services Act*, and Q.C., *Youth Protection Act*.

one incident or may happen repeatedly. For those who survive, the emotional scars are often deeper than the physical scars. This type of abuse includes the following forms:

- Shake, slap, beat, whip, push, grab or throw;
- Hit with hand or object;
- Burning with cigarettes, scalding water, or other hot objects;
- Punch, pinch, kick or bite;
- Severe physical punishment that is inappropriate to child's age;
- Other physical abuse i.e. choking, hair pulling, stabbing.

Sexual Abuse: Sexual abuse occurs when a child is used for sexual purposes by an adult or adolescent. It involves exposing a child to any sexual activity or behavior. Sexual abuse does not always consist of penetration. There are eight forms of sexual abuse:

- Penetration - intercourse, incest, rape, or sodomy;
- Attempted penetration;
- Oral sex;
- Fondling - touching, or kissing a child's genitals; making the child fondle the adult's genitals.
- Sex talk - telling "dirty" stories;
- Voyeurism - forcing the child to undress, spying on a child in the bathroom or bedroom;
- Exhibitionism - showing sex organs to a child, forced observation of sexual acts, showing pornographic material, group sex including a child; and
- Exploitation - sexual exploitation such as enticing children to pornographic sites or material on the Internet, luring children through the Internet to meet for sexual liaisons, exposing children to pornographic movies or magazines, child prostitution or using a child in the production of pornography, such as a film or magazine.

Neglect: Neglect includes the situation in which children have suffered harm, or their safety or physical, psychological or emotional development has been endangered as a result of the caregiver's failure to provide for or protect them. It is often chronic, and it usually involves repeated incidents. Neglect includes failing to provide a child with love, safety, and a sense of worth. Eight forms of neglect are listed:

- Failure to provide adequate protection from physical harm;
- Failure to provide adequate protection from sexual abuse;

- Physical neglect (inadequate nutrition/clothing/shelter);
- Medical neglect;
- Failure to provide psychological/psychiatric treatment;
- Permitting criminal behavior;
- Abandonment; and
- Educational neglect.

Emotional Abuse: Emotional abuse is a difficult category to document since the effects of emotional abuse tend to become apparent over time. It involves harming a child's sense of self and can include acts (or omissions) that result in, or place a child at risk of, serious behavioral, cognitive, emotional or mental health problems. There are four forms of emotional abuse:

- Verbal abuse;
- Psychological maltreatment;
- Inadequate nurturance/affection; and
- Exposure to non-intimate violence.

Exposure to domestic violence: In this case, children are exposed to the violence between persons who have intimate relationships. These children display emotional and behavioral problems as though they themselves were physically abused. Usually exposure to domestic violence is considered part of emotional abuse.

Facts and Myths

MYTH: Child abuse is a rare occurrence.

FACT: Statistics indicate that child abuse and neglect occur frequently in Canada.

MYTH: Abused and neglected children almost always come from poor minority and/or inner-city families.

FACT: There is no evidence that links socio-economic status, race, or educational level to abuse and neglect. Child abuse can occur within any neighborhood and school community across the country.

MYTH: Most children are sexually abused by strangers.

FACT: It is estimated that approximately 85% of all child sexual abuses are perpetrated by an offender known to and trusted by the child. Only a small percentage of perpetrators fit the stereotype of the stranger.

MYTH: Most of the time girls are victims of abuse.

FACT: Both males and females can be victims of abuse. According to the statistics from Health Canada, boys are at the greatest risk of being abused between the ages of 3 to 7 years, and for girls, it is between the ages of 9 to 15.

MYTH: Child abusers are easy to identify.

FACT: Child abusers cannot be distinguished from others. They are not only adults with mental illness or mental retardation. In fact, many offenders appear to be upstanding citizens.

MYTH: Most children who are abused do something to cause the abuse to occur.

FACT: The child is always the victim. The responsibility for the abuse lies only with the adult. In the case of child sexual abuse, many offenders try to shift the blame for their actions by accusing the child of being seductive or promiscuous.

MYTH: If a family is reported for suspected neglect or abuse, the children are automatically removed from the home.

FACT: Children are removed from their home only if there are conditions that threaten their lives, their safety or health.

Who commits child abuse?

It is a myth that child abuse is committed by strangers. Abusers are, most of the time, well-known or trusted by a child. Typically, there is a power difference between the abusers and victims. Abusers tend to be older than their victims. Another myth about abusers is that they abuse children because they suffer from mental illness. Most people who sexually exploit children are actually functional members of a community who have made the decision to exploit their power over someone who is vulnerable to them. Child abuse is a crime of power. Abusers may be rich or poor, executives or blue-collar workers, men or women.

Who are the victims?

Commonly accepted statistics indicate that 1 in 3 female and 1 in 6 male children are sexually abused. This translates into millions of children being abused each year, in Canada alone.

How child abuse occurs

There are various ways that child abuse takes place. Child sexual abusers

use variety of ways to get a child involved into sexual activities. Some abusers introduce sexual activities to a child in the form of a game or sex education. Others offer a reward to a child for engaging in sexual activity, or use physical force. Not only is physical power used to drag a child into sexual activity, but also psychological power and threats are used. For example, abusers instill a sense of obligation to a child, saying, for example, "You owe me for_____ that I did for you." Threatened with violence, physical separation from loved ones, harm to a pet, etc., are typical strategies used in child abuse.

Child abuse is not a one time occurrence; the same victim is often continuously targeted by the same abuser. As time passes, the abuse generally escalates. For example, in the case of sexual abuse, in the beginning, an abuser shows his/her part of body, and then as time passes, it progresses to kissing, fondling, masturbation, penetration, and so on. During this acceleration process, threats and violence seem to be typical. Abusers will try to convince the child that nobody would believe him/her if he/she told about the abuse, or that it might break up the family and the victim would be taken away from his/her parents.

History of Canadian laws to protect children

In 1888, *An Act for the Protection and Reformation of Neglected Children* was introduced. Foster homes were now encouraged as alternatives to institutions. With this new legislation in place, the famous reformer J.J. Kelso helped found the Children's Aid Society of Toronto in 1891, and went on to advocate for the passage of a new *Act for the Prevention of Cruelty to and Better Protection of Children* in 1893. With this legislation, children's aid societies became semi-public agencies with the legal power to remove children from their homes, supervise and manage children in municipal "shelters" and collect money from municipalities to cover the maintenance costs for wards. Societies at this time gained the status and prerogatives of legal guardians. In the 1960's, physical signs of child abuse, the so-called "battered child syndrome," was introduced. This led society to recognize difference between physical abuse and parental disciplinary actions that cause bodily harm.

In the 1970's, Canada adopted a policy of mandatory reporting and recognized psychological harm as a type of child abuse. After almost one century, in the early 1980's, sexual abuse was publicly recognized as a societal problem, in large part due to the publication of *The Badgley Report* (Loo, Bala, Clarke, and Hornick, 1999). This encouraged a change in the *Criminal Code*. In 1988, Bill C-15 came into force, creating three new offences: sexual interference; invitation to sexual touching; and sexual exploitation.

In 1988, the *Canada Evidence Act* was amended concerning children's testimony, with provisions for the use of video-recorded evidence, or a privacy screen during testimony, and having a support person present, etc. Victims were also permitted to give a statement in court; through the introduction of victim impact statement into the *Canadian Criminal Code*. These measures in the *Criminal Code* and the *Canada Evidence Act* offer protections to child victims testifying in court. These protections have been enhanced many times since then, most recently in Bill C-2, which became law in 2005.

In the late 1990's, Parliament passed Bill C-27 (child prostitution/sex tourism) and Bill C-51 to better protect children and youth from exploitation and the sex trade².

There is no specific section of the *Criminal Code* that addresses child abuse, although some acts of child abuse are recognized as criminal acts in the *Criminal Code*. Child sexual abuse offences include:

- s.151; Sexual interference;
- s.152; Invitation to sexual touching;
- s. 153; Sexual exploitation;
- s.155; Incest;
- s.159; Anal intercourse;
- s.160 (2); Compelling the commission of bestiality;
- s.160 (3); Bestiality in presence of child;
- s. 162; Voyeurism;
- s.163; Corrupting morals;
- s. 163.1; Child pornography;
- s.170; Parent or guardian of a person under the age of eighteen years procuring sexual activity;
- s.171; Householder permitting sexual activity;
- s.172 (1); Corrupting children;
- s. 172.1 (1); Luring a child;
- s.173 (2); Exposing oneself to a child;
- s.215; Failure to provide the necessities of life;
- s.218; Abandoning a child;
- s. 233; Infanticide; and
- s. 242; Neglect in child birth.

Bill C-2 was passed in 2005 and amended the definition of child pornography; creating a new prohibition against advertising child pornography; increasing maximum

² Department of Justice Canada: http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/news/nr/2001/doc_25853.html

penalties for child sexual offences, failing to provide the necessities of life (s.215), abandoning a child (s.218), and for all child pornography offences (s.163.1). It also created a new category of sexual exploitation offences and created the new offence of voyeurism.

The newest area of child abuse

While the Internet has been a source of significant positive change, it has also created new opportunities for the abuse and exploitation of children and young people through the electronic dissemination of child pornography, including accessing and distribution of child pornography, and child luring on the Internet.

Prior to the Internet, law enforcement was winning the war on child pornography, but the Internet has made child pornography a multi-billion dollar industry. According to the assumption made based on Australian population figures and U.S. research, over 50,000 children have been seen on the Internet worldwide, but only 500 of them have been identified and rescued.

When Canada first amended the *Criminal Code* in 1993 to deal with child pornography the Internet was not a factor. Thus, Bill C-15A was introduced in 2001 to address various kinds of sexual exploitation of children such as luring children on the Internet (s. 172.1); transmitting, making available, or exporting child pornography on the Internet (s. 163.1 (2,3, and 4)); or intentionally accessing child pornography on the Internet (s.163.1 (4.1)).

Millions of children are online either in their own houses, in public libraries, at schools or at a friend's house. There are many potential dangers for kids on the Internet. Children can be exposed to inappropriate materials which include sexuality, hate or violence or they may meet predators in chat rooms who are seeking a meeting. Stalking and bullying can even occur on the Internet.

Parents must talk to their children about both the benefits and dangers of the Internet. Also, it is very important for parents to track their child's movement on the Internet and in chat rooms. The computer should be placed in an open/common area in the house, where kids can be monitored while online.

***Criminal Code* protections for children**

In addition to laws to punish offenders who abuse children, there are also laws to prevent abuse. Under the section 161 of the *Criminal Code*, a court can prohibit an offender "who has been found guilty of a sexual offence against a child from: attending a public area where children are reasonably expected to be present; seeking, obtaining or continuing any employment or volunteer work which involves being in a

position of trust or authority towards children; or using a computer system for the purpose of communicating with children.”

Section 810.1 permits a court to order a person to abstain from various activities likely to bring them into contact with persons under the age of 14. Unlike a section 161 order, an order under section 810.1 does not require a conviction for an offence or even the laying of a charge - it can be obtained by anyone who can establish a reasonable fear that the person in question will commit one or more of the enumerated sexual offences against a person under the age of 14. However, a section 810.1 order can only be for a maximum period of 12 months and can be difficult to obtain.

Section 718.2 of the *Criminal Code* clearly states that if there is any evidence of which an offender abused a child, it will be an aggravating factor and the court can impose harsher sentences.

Possible signs of abuse

It is not always easy to recognize child abuse, because it happens at home or children may try to hide the abuse. These signs may not always be present, but should be viewed as warning signs:

- Physical injuries, i.e. cuts, bruises, burns, and fractures;
- Lack of adult supervision;
- Sexual acting out;
- Difficulty walking or sitting;
- Evidence of poor hygiene;
- Aggressive, disruptive, and sometimes illegal behavior;
- Anger and rage;
- Self-destructive or self-abusive behavior, suicidal thoughts;
- Passive, withdrawn or clinging behavior;
- Anxiety and fears in general;
- Fear of a certain person or place;
- Regression;
- School problems or failure, i.e. irregular attendance, significant change in performance or behaviour;
- Feelings of sadness or other symptoms of depression;
- Flashbacks or nightmares;
- Bed wetting;
- Sleep and eating problems; or
- Stomach illness all the time with no identifiable reason.

In addition, children who are experiencing physical abuse may not be willing to explain an injury or be afraid of physical contact. Children who are emotionally abused often need a lot of attention. Children who often appear hungry, listless and tired may be experiencing neglect, and those who take on responsibility beyond normal age expectation may be experiencing an exposure to domestic violence.

Boys and girls are generally affected differently by abuse. Girls are more likely to internalize their response to violence, and experience, for example, suicidal ideation, eating disorders, low self-esteem and psychological disorders. Boys are more likely to externalize their response in violence, displaying, for example, increased aggression, delinquency and spousal abuse. Boys who have been exposed to violence in their homes are more likely to be violent in their adolescence and adult relationships than boys who are not exposed to violence.

High-risk adult behaviours

There is no “stereotypical” child abuser. In fact, most abusers present as normal, contributing members of the community. Here are some possible warning signs of abusers:

- Refuses to let a child set any of his or her own limits;
- Insists on hugging, touching, kissing, tickling, wrestling with or holding a child even when the child does not want this affection;
- Is overly interested in the sexuality of a particular child or teen (e.g., talks repeatedly about the child’s developing body or interferes with normal teen dating);
- Manages to get time alone or insists on time alone with a child with no interruptions;
- Spends most of his/her spare time with children and has little interest in spending time with someone their own age;
- Regularly offers to babysit many different children for free or takes children on overnight outings alone;
- Buys children expensive gifts or gives them money for no apparent reason;
- Frequently walks in on children/teens in the bathroom; and
- Allows children or teen to consistently get away with inappropriate behavior.

It is crucial for parents and/ or care-takers to recognize that most abusers are known to the victim or have a close relationship with the victim. While sexual abusers tend to keep children close, neglect and emotional abusers tend to be indifferent to a

child, and reject a child.³

What happens when child welfare authorities are called?

Child welfare agencies are usually non-profit agencies working in local communities to provide help and support to children and their families. They often provide child protection services, adoption programs, foster care, child care service, therapeutic care service, early childhood service and day care service. The mandate of most child welfare agencies is to keep the family together where possible. Child welfare agencies may provide family therapy, some addiction services, and financial services in order to reintegrate the family and enhance their social functioning. Their responsibility is to ensure the safety, protection and the well-being of children.

The following is a list of questions a concerned person may wish to consider before calling child welfare (from the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies):

- When should I call child welfare authorities?
 - ✍ As soon as you suspect abuse or neglect - 24 hours-a-day, 7 days-a-week. A phone call will bring immediate help to a child at risk of abuse. It is not your responsibility to determine whether abuse or neglect has occurred. Each agency is responsible for the investigation and the assessment of abuse and neglect of children and also the ultimate management of a case when a child is taken into care.
- Who calls?
 - ✍ Professionals and citizens when they suspect abuse or neglect.
 - ✍ Families when they have difficulties managing their children.
 - ✍ Children call when they are encountering problems at home.
- What happens when I call?
 - ✍ The agency investigates reported allegations of abuse and neglect using various risk assessment scales.
 - ✍ The child and family will be offered supportive counselling to help keep the child at home.
- What if parents are unable to provide care for their children?
 - ✍ Children may be admitted to care with the consent of the parents or by court order.
 - ✍ The agency might seek out relatives or other significant persons to provide short-term care.

³ For more information, please visit http://www.preventchildabuse.org/learn_more/parents/recognizing_abuse.pdf

- ✍ The agency will continue to provide help to the family, encourage visits and ultimately reunite the child and family unless the child is made a Crown ward. Every effort is made to reunite child and family and regular visits are encouraged. Parents may be requested to contribute financially to their child's support.
- Who looks after the child in care?
 - ✍ Most children receive care in foster homes or group homes in or near their home community. Some children may require placements geared to their special needs. Foster families are able to provide care, understanding and relief to many children during a family's time of crisis. Placements are usually temporary with the plan to return the child to the natural family following regular counselling and visits. As a last resort, the court may make a child a crown ward if the family situation cannot be restored. At that time, a permanent plan for the child will be developed.⁴

It is important to remember that the suspected abuse or neglect of a child must be reported to:

- local child welfare services (e.g., children's aid society or child and family services agency);
- provincial/territorial social service ministries or departments; or
- local police.

Complaints about individual child welfare or child protection services should be directed to:

- the child welfare agency providing the services;
- or the provincial/territorial children's advocate.⁵

Why children may not disclose

Although there are many laws to protect children from child abuse, research indicates the number of actual cases of child abuse is much higher than reported rates. Children who have experienced abuse tend not to tell what they have experienced. There are several reasons why children may keep abuse secret.

⁴ <http://www.oacas.org/resources/whentoreport.htm>

⁵ http://www.cwlc.ca/index_e.htm

- Children are afraid of being punished and harmed further by abusers if they tell someone about the abuse;
- Abuser may manipulate, bribe, coerce or threaten the child or other loved ones to prevent them from telling anyone about the abuse;
- Sometimes victims do not want to see the loved one who is hurting them get into trouble;
- Some children believe that nobody will listen to or believe them;
- They are convinced by the abuser that the abuse is their fault;
- Some children are afraid of being removed from the home;
- Some have a feeling of shame and embarrassment, especially in cases of sexual abuse; or
- In some sexual abuse cases, children are too young to know what the action means. Others are groomed to believe adult and child sexual relationships are normal.

Where can children turn for help?

Children must always be believed when they disclose abuse. It is a fact that children rarely make up such allegations.

If a child has disclosed to you, it means you are trusted to them. Listen to the child as calmly and quietly as you can. Do not make promises you cannot keep. Consider telling the child:

- that you believe them;
- that you are glad they told;
- that the abuse is NOT their fault;
- that you will do your best to find help; and
- that you cannot keep this information secret (it is law that it must be reported).

Sometimes children will choose to disclose their abuse to a parent or other relative, a child welfare agency, provincial or territorial social services department, the police department, teachers, doctors, dentists or any other professionals. After a child discloses abuse, your responsibility is to report it to child welfare authorities. Through this process you can find more services to help the victim, such as therapy and counselling.

There is also the Kids' Help phone where children can get bilingual help in anywhere in Canada (1-800-668-6868).

What to do if you suspect child abuse

Caution should be used when asking a child about abuse or neglect, as there is a potential to complicate and/or ruin the criminal and child protection investigations. If you suspect abuse, you have an obligation to report it immediately.

- Respond to the abused child supportively and caringly;
- Avoid questions like, "Is everything ok at home?", as a child might try to deflect your concern with a quick yes/no answer.
- Ask questions like: "Can you tell me about anything that might be worrying or upsetting you?", or "When I look at or read your work, it seems to me like you are saying that you feel worried or upset about some things. Can you tell me about that?"
- Report your concern to any professional dealing with children. For example, pediatrician, school teacher, social worker, etc;
- You can read *The Secret of Silver Horse*⁶ with the child to encourage them to disclose abuse. The story deals with sexual abuse, but can be applied to all forms of abuse;
- If the child discloses, reassure him/her that he/she did the right thing in telling, and has done nothing wrong. Let the child know that you will do whatever you can keep him/her safe. Reinforce that the abuse is not their fault!

People can also report suspected child pornography and other forms of online abuse to local police or to Cybertip.ca (www.cybertip.ca).

Do's and don'ts when there is a disclosure (from the Toronto Child Abuse Centre)

If you suspect that a child may have been abused or is at risk for abuse, it is not up to you to try to prove your suspicions. Trying to do this may contaminate or ruin the investigation and may put the child at further risk. If you suspect a child is being or has been abused or if a child/adult discloses abuse, you must report this information to the authorities. The investigation will be done by experts.

If you have seen or heard something that makes you suspect child abuse, remember to:

Control your emotions:

- Try to be calm and relaxed.
- Do not look shocked, disgusted or say mean things about who you think may have abused the child.

⁶ For more information, please visit <http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/dept/pub/ssh/>

- If you feel that you cannot control your feelings, take a minute or two to yourself and breathe deeply.

Offer comfort:

Support children by letting them know that:

- They were very brave to tell.
- You are glad they are telling you about this.
- You are sorry that this has happened to them.
- They are not alone - this happens to other children too.
- You will do everything you can to help.
- You are there to love and support them.

Do not say things like:

- "How can you say those things about ...?"
- "Liar."
- "That horrible man has ruined you forever!"
- "How could you let him do those things to you?"
- "Why didn't you tell me this before?"
- Children may "take back" what they have said (this is called recanting). These children continue to need your love and support.

Be aware of the child's age & skills:

- Accept the words a child uses (including "slang" words) to describe what happened. Some children do not know the right words for body parts or sexual behaviours. Do not correct or change the words the child uses - it is extremely important for the investigation that the child's words are used when telling what happened.
- Do not use words that may frighten the child, for example "rape, incest, child abuse, wife assault or jail".

Ask questions that let the person tell the story in his/her own words:

- "Can you tell me what happened?"
- "What happened next?"
- "How did you get that bruise?"

Do not:

- Ask questions that suggest what happened or who did it, for example, "Did you get that bruise because Mommy hit you with a brush?"
- Question what the child tells you, for example, by asking, "Are you sure it was Uncle Ted?"
- Interrupt or add your own words when the child/adult stops talking.
- Ask children "why" something may have happened - many children may

think you are blaming them for what happened.

- Try to change the mind of a child who has recanted or changed his/her story.
- Keep on asking questions because you want to try to prove abuse.

Respect the person who discloses:

- If a child/adult is telling, listen.
- If a child/adult is quiet, do not try to make him/her talk.
- Do not force a child to undress if you suspect s/he may have injuries.
- Do not show off a child's injuries to others.

Tell the child what will happen next:

- Do not make promises you cannot keep, for example, do not agree to keep what the child said a "secret." It is important to explain to the child that some secrets must be shared in order to get help, or to keep people from being hurt. Tell the child the information will be shared only with people who will try to help.
- Answer the child's questions as simply and honestly as possible. Do not make up answers. For example, if a child asks, "Will Daddy have to go to jail now?" You can only say, "I don't know. Other people decide that."
- Do not tell the child to keep any of your discussions with him/her secret.

Failure to report child abuse

Although the reporting rate is growing, many studies show that actual rates of child abuse may be much higher than those reported. Children have many reasons for not reporting and others who witness or suspect child abuse may not report it because they:

- do not want to get "involved";
- attachment to the abuser;
- have personal views which condone the use of physical punishment;
- believe that the abuse is not "serious", especially if the child does not have visible or severe injuries;
- believe that reporting the abuse to the authorities is not in the child's best interest;
- believe that reporting may not solve the problem because, for example, there may be a lack of appropriate services to help the child;
- lack knowledge about the signs and symptoms of abuse;
- do not understand their responsibility to report abuse;

- do not know that they can report to child welfare agencies, provincial or territorial social services departments or police departments; or
- do not know that a report can be made anonymously, and that there are no legal consequences, unless the report is false and is made maliciously.

Possible consequences of child abuse

In most of the cases, consequences of child abuse are life-long and can be devastating. Even children who witness violence in the home display emotional and behavioural problems just as if they themselves were physically abused. Adults with a history of child abuse are more likely to have:

- Poor self-image (low self-esteem);
- Inability to trust or love others;
- Aggressive, disruptive, and sometimes illegal behavior;
- Passive, withdrawn or clingy behavior;
- Fear of entering into new relationships or activities;
- Flashbacks or nightmares;
- Chronic head, face or pelvic pain;
- Poor physical health such as chronic lung disease;
- Irritable bowel syndrome;
- Asthma or other respiratory problems;
- Drug, alcohol and solvent abuse and addiction;
- Developmental delay;
- A partner with a substance abuse problem;
- Sexual dysfunction; and
- Abuse their own children.⁷

Treatment

There are many treatment options for traumatized children to minimize the effects of abuse. Therapists, teachers, social workers and health care professionals may provide these treatments. Treatment differs depending on what type of trauma a child has suffered.

- Physical
Physical injuries can be addressed by health care professionals providing:
 - Medication;
 - Surgeries; and/or

⁷ For more information, please visit <http://www.lcc.gc.ca/pdf/mckenna.pdf> and http://www.phac-aspec.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/familyviolence/html/nfntsconsequencevio_e.html

- Rehabilitation and any other required treatments.

- Psychological

There are a number of approaches for addressing psychological concerns. These may be provided by psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers or other counsellors at hospitals, community health centres or in private practice. Such approaches are:

- Counselling;
- Play therapy;
- Psychotherapy; and
- Education, art, music, animal, spiritual and recreation therapies.

Child protection services may provide follow-up intervention, which includes support services to families. Parenting programs not only help parents to develop their skills, but also to provide sufficient nurturing to their children. Individual counselling and family counselling are considered to be effective to enhance family situation and family integration. Medication can be useful for the symptoms of depression, anxiety and other symptoms, but may be more effective if used in combination with counselling. Later in their life, the victim may need to undergo couples or relationship counselling when they heal to the point of finding a long-term relationship.

Recovering from child abuse is a very difficult process for most adults. Adult survivors of child abuse often develop addictive or compulsive behaviours while attempting to mask the feelings and emotions connected to child sexual abuse. For these victims, addiction therapy or anger management can be proper treatments. Child abuse victims suppress their anger, and turn it inward. They have been threatened verbally and/or nonverbally to keep them quiet about the abuse, and they live with that fear. As a result, many victims turn anger on themselves, leading to depression, anxiety, and self-destructive behaviour. Some of the treatments to deal with these struggles can be depression management, anxiety relief, and panic attack treatment.

Other victims experience shame about these coping skills or strategies, which have been used to numb the pain of the abuse. Some group counselling sessions can be used to help victims accept facts, and gain skills to deal with them. For example, counselling which focuses on emotional development, offers victims a chance to explore issues of emotional sensitivity, expression and interpersonal conflict resolution.

The victim often experiences physical discomforts, pain and disorders that are related to their abuse. These may be treated through interventions from a medical

practitioner or therapist.

For adult survivors, a key component to healing and recovery is to express and share their feelings. This can be achieved by survivors learning to acknowledge and identify a wide variety of feelings and emotions as well as finding ways to release them without hurting themselves or others. Trust building, and positive coping skill development are a main goal of treatment. A shift from negative experiences in the past to positive plans for the future shows that a victim is in the moving-on stage to recover from the trauma.

As there is variety of treatment options for each individual, the length of time to heal differs depending on a person, his/her life experiences, and the combination of treatment. However, healing is possible. When the victims' desire to heal is met with information, skilled support, and a safe environment, they begin to grow in ways they never dreamed possible.

Grieving can be a part of healing process as the victims say goodbye to parts of themselves. It is necessary to become very aware of the interrelationship between past and present in order to grow and heal.

Each victim's experience in healing is different: there is no right or wrong way to heal from abuse. The University of Victoria's Anti-Violence Project provides a list of some of the steps that survivors of child sexual abuse may go through in making their journey toward healing.

1. The decision to heal.
2. The emergency stage – Beginning to deal with memories and suppressed feelings.
3. Remembering - Remembering is the process of getting back both memory and feeling.
4. Believing it happened – Coming to believe that the abuse really happened, and that it really hurt, is a vital part of the healing process.
5. Breaking silence – Telling another person about what happened is a powerful healing force that can dispel the shame of being a victim.
6. Understanding that it wasn't their fault.
7. Making contact with the child within – Getting in touch with the child within can help you feel compassion for yourself, more anger at your abuser, and greater intimacy with others.
8. Trusting yourself – The best guide for healing is your own inner voice. Learning to trust your own perceptions, feelings, and intuitions form a new basis for action in the world.

9. Grieving and mourning – Grieving is a way to honor your pain, let go, and move into the present.
10. Anger – The backbone of healing: anger is a powerful and liberating force.
11. Disclosure and confrontation.
12. Forgiveness – The essential forgiveness is for the survivor themselves.
13. Spirituality – Having a sense of power great than oneself can be a real asset in the healing process.
14. Resolution and moving on⁸.

Although healing is possible for all victims of child abuse, the difficulty is that many victims do not have access to the support or assistance needed to heal. Many do not have the financial means to access professional therapy, or know where to go to access information and support. Thus, many survivors are terribly isolated. They need your patience and support. You can help them by listening, reassuring them that you are not leaving or pressuring them.

Prevention

In order to prevent child abuse, parents/guardians/caregivers should teach their children at a very young age that abuse is wrong and they have a right to say no, no matter what their relationship is to the abuser. Education on child abuse for both children and adults is the key for prevention.⁹

Some important items to teach young children:

- Abuse is always wrong;
- If someone tries to touch their bodies and do things that make them feel strange, say “NO” to that person;
- It is OK to say “NO” when someone they know and care about does something they do not like;
- No matter how acquainted or trusted a person is to you, the action is wrong if you feel uncomfortable;
- To become familiar with helping agencies, i.e. police, child welfare, Kids’ Help line, etc.¹⁰

Parents/caregiver should know:

- Children who are isolated from others are often at a greater risk of being abused;
- Disclosing takes bravery and is often difficult to admit; and

⁸ For more details, please visit http://www.uvss.uvic.ca/avp/CH_Heal.html

⁹ For specific services, please refer the section on *Support for public legal education and community-based prevention programs and services* at http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/fm/sexual_abuse_fs.html

¹⁰ www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/child_protection/child_abuse_handbook/part5.htm

- Reporting can be anonymous.

In addition to education for children, adults need to gain more awareness of child abuse so that they can recognize signs and symptoms of abuse to respond to it to prevent further impact on children.

For some types of child abuse such as luring on the Internet, there are general rules to protect children. Parents should consider educating themselves about the Internet even if they do not use the Internet. They can create a family agreement for Internet use, including hours of use, which sites can be accessed and which ones cannot. Also placing a computer in a central, open location, like the living room, will help prevent these types of child abuse because online activity can be monitored. Parents can use filtering software which block specific connections and servers. *AOL Parental Control* and *B Safe Online* are some of the examples of internet filtering software¹¹. Also, they can use filtered browsers or children's search engine, such as Yahoo! Kids to prevent a child from accessing inappropriate servers.

Talking to children about potential online dangers, such as giving out personal information to strangers, is one means to prevent cyber child abuse. Teach children that chat room acquaintances are strangers; talking to a stranger on the Internet is no different than talking to a stranger on the street. It is very important that children use a pretend name or nickname that does not reveal anything about them in order to prevent from being identified.

Conclusion

Child abuse has an enormously negative impact not only on children's lives, but also those adults who survive child abuse. For example, some adults may become abusive as a result of what happened to them as children. Victims of child abuse should never be blamed for what happened to them. In fact, caregivers must find a way to help children who have been abused. With the proper support and treatment, children can recover from the trauma they have suffered.

¹¹ Please visit http://www.cybertip.ca/en/parental_controls/omternet_filtering to see more resources.

Appendix A: Helping the child who has been abused

The following suggestions for helping an abused child are from the Toronto Child Abuse Centre:

Help the child develop positive self-esteem

Children who have been abused often have poor self-esteem. Staff/caregivers can help to build a child's self-esteem by:

- Planning activities where success is built in - these would be based on the child's age and development, and realistic expectations.
- Giving positive reinforcement for accomplishments and desired behaviour.
- Displaying the child's accomplishments.
- Reinforcing through discussion and activities that women and men are both valued, respected and should never be controlled through violence.

Help the child to trust

Children who have been abused often feel betrayed and do not trust that their world is safe. Staff/caregivers can help the child who has been abused learn to trust again by:

- Establishing limits and routines and being consistent.
- Being loving and affectionate, and respecting those children who may need more time before they feel comfortable with being touched.
- Allowing children to be angry without the fear of punishment.
- Spending one-on-one time so the child feels cared for and listened to.

Help the child to identify and express emotions

Staff/caregivers can help children who have been abused to show and understand feelings that may have been hidden or punished in the past by:

- Naming emotions.
- Planning sensory and dramatic play activities.
- Providing books and other play materials that help children learn about feelings.
- Showing children healthy ways to express anger and solve problems without hurting themselves or others.
- Accepting a child's need to talk about fears, sadness and losses experienced because of abuse.

Help the child to learn to communicate

Children who have been abused may not have had opportunities for conversation and sharing in a positive parenting relationship. Staff/caregivers can help the child who has been abused learn communication skills by:

- Speaking to children calmly.
- Using a firm but kind tone when asking children to do things or when expressing disapproval.
- Giving children the message that it is OK to ask questions and say how they feel.
- Spending time talking and listening.
- Planning activities that encourage language and listening skills.

Help the child to identify and solve problem situations

Many children who have been abused have learned that problems are solved by using violence. Staff/caregivers can help children learn positive ways to problem-solve by:

- Teaching children that they have choices and how to pick the best choice.
- Using positive methods to guide children's behaviour.
- Planning activities that require problem-solving.
- Solving any conflicts that happen with nonviolent methods, and role-model calm, non-aggressive ways of dealing with anger.

Help the child to catch-up developmentally

As a result of abuse, many children have not developed at the normal rate. Staff/caregivers can help children with their developmental skills by:

- Planning activities that help them practice motor and language skills.
- Supporting positive relationships with friends.
- Helping children with schoolwork.
- Seeking the advice of appropriate professionals (knowledge of atypical development and therapies is a specialized area).

Help the child to develop a safety plan

Children who are in a situation where there is violence, or the fear of violence can be encouraged to:

- Learn how to dial 9-1-1 (i.e., practice memorizing the phone number with the children; teach the children to leave the phone off the hook until police arrive).
- Choose a neighbour they can go to for help.
- Plan how to keep safe during a violent scene, for example, identify a safe spot to hide, and do not try to stop the fight.

Link families to community supports

Victims of abuse and violence need support to cope with stress and to build healthy relationships. Staff/caregivers can help by:

- Directing families to local community agencies that work with children and families (e.g., shelters, legal aid, help lines, parenting groups).
- Watching how children in their care are developing, and reporting any suspicions of abuse.

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