

## TOPIC

## Early Childhood Sexual Trauma

### WHAT CONSTITUTES SEXUAL ABUSE OF A CHILD?

Sexual abuse includes any time a child is used in any way for the sexual stimulation of an adult or another child. This may involve touching, voyeurism, exhibitionism, penetration or showing a child pornography. Regardless of the form it takes, sexual abuse is a traumatic experience, particularly so for a child whose underlying sense of self and safety is in the developmental stages. A child never gives true consent, even if the abuse is masked in “play” or seen by the child as an enjoyable activity. Exploitation of a child for sexual arousal is always abuse. There is no such thing as “not so bad” when speaking of experiences of childhood sexual abuse and their impacts on victims throughout their lives.

### IMPACT OF SEXUAL TRAUMA ON CHILDREN

From infancy throughout childhood, important attachments to caregivers enable children to develop beliefs about themselves as valuable, cared-for individuals, and about the world as a basically safe place. Early childhood trauma of any kind - accidents, natural disasters, witnessing violence, being neglected, sexual abuse, etc., interferes with those normal and important attachment formations and impedes lessons of self-worth and safety. Compounded by a child’s inability to understand everything that happens to him/her, to articulate emotions and to provide for his/her own protection, this leads to overwhelming stress and fear at exactly the time when a person normally learns trust and security.

*“We need to eliminate the stigma associated with talking about sexual abuse in order for victims to come forward for the support and therapies that can so greatly improve their lives.”*

Dr. David Buch, Chief Medical Officer  
CARRIER CLINIC

A recent longitudinal study (meaning the study followed its participants over a long period from childhood to early adulthood), confirmed what professionals who deal with victims of childhood sexual abuse have often observed from their experience and shorter-term studies. That is, childhood sexual abuse has profound psychological, behavioral and physiological effects on its victims. The issues more prevalent in these children include poor academic performance, high rates of truancy, depression, dissociation, sexual acting-out, low self-esteem, immaturity, aggressiveness, bullying, weak family attachments, obesity, hormonal imbalances and lower IQ scores.

Because the developing brain is extremely vulnerable, childhood trauma in general is associated with a smaller brain cortex, the area of the brain that affects memory, attention, language and other complex functions. Thus, young victims may present with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) symptoms, or may seem to “space out”, especially in response to stress (this is called dissociation).

All of these effects impact a child’s interpersonal relationships, academic success and ability to behave within acceptable parameters. Often, social services, academic interventions, and the juvenile justice system become regular participants in these children’s lives. Unfortunately, the underlying cause, sexual trauma, is not always discovered. As a result, maladaptive behaviors are treated or punished without addressing the problem at the root of these behaviors.

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POST TRAUMATIC  
STRESS DISORDER  
(PTSD) AND CHILDHOOD  
SEXUAL TRAUMA

Children who experience sexual abuse often develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a condition that, without treatment, can impact their entire lives. Symptoms of PTSD can include physical hyperactivity, intense fear, flashbacks, sleep disturbances, extreme stress reactions, sensitivity to loud noises or other stimuli, withdrawal and depression. These and other manifestations of PTSD lead to social problems and impact physical and mental health throughout a lifetime. PTSD sufferers are at increased risk for substance abuse, eating disorders and suicide.

While PTSD can be a debilitating condition, help is available through a variety of treatment modalities. Seeking treatment is the important first step toward overcoming this and other life-altering effects of childhood sexual trauma.

ADULT SURVIVORS OF  
CHILDHOOD SEXUAL  
TRUAMA

Aside from PTSD, childhood sexual trauma can have other significant impacts into adulthood. The longitudinal study previously mentioned found a host of difficulties more prevalent in these adults than in their non-abused peers. These include depression, dissociation, obesity, sleep disturbances, gastrointestinal complaints, further incidents of assault and abuse, sexual preoccupation, young age at birth of first children and suicide. These adults tend to have difficulty with anger management and trust, poor coping skills, low self esteem, trouble setting boundaries, and persistent feelings of guilt, shame and blame. Without treatment, these can lead to ongoing psychological, physiological and interpersonal issues. Many adult survivors self-medicate, resulting in substance abuse and addiction.

It is important to note that maladaptive coping skills are not in themselves bad. Children experiencing sexual trauma utilize their insufficient resources to protect themselves mentally or physically from serious harm. However ineffective the techniques they develop may be in the rest of their lives, they were once vital to the child's sense of control and safety. Learning new skills and discarding those that no longer serve can be a frightening and challenging process, made easier with support from professionals and loved ones who help the adult survivor to separate past trauma from their present condition.

HOPE FOR VICTIMS OF  
CHILDHOOD SEXUAL  
ABUSE

Obviously, identifying the abuse right away enables the start of the healing process. Behavioral changes such as withdrawal, displays of anger, anxiety, fear of being alone with a particular person, knowledge about sex incongruous with age, bed-wetting, and nightmares may be signs that a child is being or has been abused. Furthermore, if a child discloses abuse it is important to offer reassurance that he/she is believed, safe, and not at fault. Help can be found immediately by calling the National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453). In the event of immediate danger, call 911.

Even if not discovered and addressed immediately, childhood sexual trauma and its impacts can be effectively treated. For children, this may begin with a Behavioral Health Assessment. Specific treatment modalities have been developed by professionals to enable healing and growth, ranging from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy designed for young children, Child-Parent Therapy, therapies that focus on attachment and self-regulation, PTSD Intervention, and Trauma-Focused Therapy. With rates of childhood sexual abuse at 20-30% for boys and 30-40% for girls, these treatment approaches have a long history of helping children thrive after this type of trauma.

HELP FOR  
ADULT SURVIVORS

For adults dealing with the effects of sexual abuse from their childhood, treatment is also highly effective. It is never too late to begin healing. Adults often benefit from education about childhood sexual trauma, which serves to de-stigmatize their experience and understand the impact it has had on their mental and physical health. Support groups, one-on-one therapy, stress-management, treatment for substance abuse and addiction, PTSD treatment, and training in new coping skills are among the powerful tools at an adult survivor's disposal. Although the process will not be easy and may take considerable time and commitment, the outcome will certainly be worthwhile, as the adult survivor grows and thrives, despite childhood trauma, to lead a satisfying and healthy life.