

MYTHS ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

MYTH: Sexual abusers are usually strangers to their victims.

FACT: In nine out of ten cases the victim knows the abuser. Sexual abusers can be primary caretakers, other relatives, neighbors, teachers, and professionals who work with children.

MYTH: Incidents of child abuse are always reported to the police.

FACT: Few incidents of child sexual abuse are actually reported. If the abuser is a relative of a child victim, it is even less likely that the incident will be reported.

MYTH: Sexual abuse of children is usually violent, and physical trauma is the greatest harm resulting from this kind of abuse.

FACT: Violent attacks and forced penetration of the victim occur in only 5 percent of reported cases. The abuser often finds it easy to trick a child into sexual contact. Bribes and affection are the most effective tools of the sexual abuser. Psychological and emotional harm is the most devastating effect of sexual abuse of children.

MYTH: Children make up stories about being sexually abused.

FACT: It is very rare that a child lies about sexual abuse. Children need support and comfort when they disclose what has happened to them. They need to be reassured that they are believed and that someone will help them.

MYTH: Some children act seductively and want to have sexual relations with adults.

FACT: Children never ask to be sexually abused. While some children may be looking for affection or responding to it, the responsibility rests with the offender, not the victim. This also applies to cases where the abuser is someone the child knows or even loves.

MYTH: Children never get over the harm of sexual abuse.

FACT: In cases where violent physical harm did not occur and where the assailant does not have a close relationship with the victim, children recover faster than adult victims. The most important factor in children's recovery is how appropriately the incident is handled.

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WHAT TO DO WHEN A CHILD IS SEXUALLY ABUSED

1. Understand your feelings

If your child is the victim of sexual abuse, know the following...

- It is very important that you understand your own feelings so that you can handle the situation appropriately.
- A child's recovery from the emotional trauma of sexual abuse is quicker when adults handle the situation in a calm and caring manner.
- Be aware of your own feelings of horror, fear, and anger, and try to control them.
- Do not communicate them to your child because they might think these feelings are directed at them, not the abuser.
- Your over reaction can create anxiety in your child.
- Be aware of expressing blame directly or indirectly to your child. ("If only you had come straight home.") Do not act upon any feelings of revenge. This will only hinder the work of the police.
- Make sure your child has been cared for, seek out professional counseling for yourself.

2. UNDERSTAND YOUR CHILD'S FEELINGS.

- If your child has been sexually abused, do the following...
- Listen to your child without adding thoughts or words to their story
- Allow your child to do most of the talking
- Find out as much as you can about the incident and the abuser
- Let them know that talking about the incident was the right thing to do and that no harm will come to them
- Help your child feel safe and affirmed
- Calm and reassure your child
- Do everything you can to relieve any feelings of guilt and shame
- Assure your child that the abuser is the one who is to blame

3. GET HELP

Continue to give your child emotional support as you do the following...

- Get medical help ASAP!
- Take the child to a hospital emergency room, or have your doctor examine and treat the child for possible physical trauma.

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- Internal injuries might not be evident.
- Report the incident to the police.
- It is very important that you follow through once the child has told you about actual or attempted sexual abuse.
- One study indicates that a sexual abuser assaults an average of 68 children before being arrested.
- This figure indicates that it is very likely that your child was neither the first nor the last victim of the abuser. It is your moral obligation to report all incidents to the police.

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