



FAST FACTS: Parenting a Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused

Caring for a child who has been abused, particularly sexually abused, can be confusing and a scary undertaking. As a caregiver, you may fear that you do not know how to help the child who has been abused or may even worry that they will abuse others. By educating yourself on some basic knowledge you can create a safe environment for the child, encouraging continued growth and resilience.

What is 'normal'?

It is important to know that children display a range of behaviors and there is no set of rules about what constitutes "normal". It is natural for children to engage in some sexual behaviors and a child's interest in sex and sexuality will vary between individuals. Healthy sexual behavior typically involves information gathering and exploration – the child learns about sex and sexuality by looking, touching, and noticing differences. In addition, children typically engage in these types of behaviors with other children who are the same age and size and likely have some sort of friendship with one another.

Examples of common behaviors include touching/rubbing their own genitals, exploring differences between males and females, asking about genitals, interested in people going to the bathroom, sitting too close, playing doctor or house, using 'dirty' words, and liking to be naked or trying to see others naked.

What is 'abnormal'?

When behavior seems to move past general curiosity and exploration, it may pose a risk to the child and those around them. Again, while there is no guaranteed list of behaviors that prove a child has been sexually abused, there are some behaviors that should raise your red flag. Behaviors that seem unusual, aggressive, or excessive should be of concern. In addition, if your child is playing with children of different ages or children they do not know well, your red flag should go up.

Examples of uncommon behaviors include behavior that causes pain to themselves or others, the child is unable to be redirected, knowledge that is inconsistent with their developmental level, the child forces another child to engage in an activity, the play is angry or aggressive, touching others without permission, and repeatedly asking questions about sex.

The following resources offer additional information about normal and abnormal sexual behavior:

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/preschool/Pages/Sexual-Behaviors-Young-Children.aspx>

<https://www.stopitnow.org/ohc-content/what-is-age-appropriate>

<https://www.stopitnow.org/ohc-content/warning-signs-possible-abuse>

Impact of Sexual Abuse on Children

Children who have been sexually abused may be vulnerable to acting out or being victimized; their boundaries have been crossed and they likely lack a feeling of safety and trust. The following are helpful tips for parenting your child who has been sexually abused:

- Help your child to understand they are not to blame for the abuse. Seek help for your child and connect them with professionals who are trained in working with children who have experienced trauma (i.e., sexual abuse).
- Staff at MN ADOPT can provide you with a list of professionals trained in the treatment of childhood trauma.
- Establish, maintain, and respect healthy boundaries within the family and with extended family and friends.
 - Examples might include: helping your child say 'no' to others, teaching your child they do not need to hug or kiss adults if they do not want to (which teaches them they have rights to their body), and helping your child keep space between them and others if necessary, etc.
- Set clear rules and expectations for behavior.
- Respond calmly, yet directly to your child and their behavior.
- Help your child identify their triggers (things that happen unexpectedly and result in your child remembering their abuse). Create healthy ways to calm and regulate your child after being triggered; a professional can also help with this!
- Communicate! Parents often fear talking about sex and sexuality with their children, thinking it may encourage them to engage in sexual activity. This is not true! Providing your child with factual and healthy sex education empowers your child to make educated decisions.
 - This is particularly important when fostering and/or adopting older children. Though your family may have certain views about sex, sexuality, and contraception, you will need to consider your adolescent's history. While you may be adamantly against contraception and encourage abstinence, your teenager may already have been exposed to sexual activity and need your guidance to find healthy and safe ways to behave.
 - These websites offer help and tips on how to talk to your child about sex and sexuality:
 - <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/puberty/Pages/Talking-to-Your-Child-About-Sex.aspx>
 - <https://www.todayparent.com/family/parenting/age-by-age-guide-to-talking-to-kids-about-sex/>
- If your child has difficulties with impulse control (e.g., a child with FASD or ADHD), you may need to provide extra support (i.e., communication, contraception, etc.) and guidance around ways to manage their impulses. Sexual impulses become heightened in adolescents and your child may not have the internal capacity to control their urges on their own.
- This website offers information about FASD and sexual behaviors:
 - <https://edmontonfetalalcoholnetwork.org/2019/07/08/knowfasd-sexual-behaviours/>
- It is important to know that the effects of early childhood trauma do not always present right away. Your child may not begin to experience difficulties until later childhood or even adolescence. It is imperative that you keep open communication with your child and continue to observe their behavior for any changes.

- Long-term effects of childhood abuse may include: increased mental health concerns, increased substance use, increased medical issues, and involvement in the criminal justice system
- These two websites offer a wealth of information about early childhood trauma:
 - <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/early-childhood-trauma>
 - <https://www.healthcaretoolbox.org/>

Additional Resources on Sexual Abuse

<https://www.stopitnow.org/>

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/Pages/default.aspx>

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-abused/>

<https://www.cornerhousemn.org/for-caregivers>

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