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Sexual abuse

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Sexual abuse

Signs, indicators and effects

Who is affected

Preventing child sexual abuse

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Facts and statistics

Children who are sexually abused may:

Stay away from certain people

- they might avoid being alone with people, such as family members or friends
- they could seem frightened of a person or reluctant to socialise with them.

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<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-abuse/signs-symptoms-effects/> - 06/09/2018

Show sexual behaviour that's inappropriate for their age

- a child might become sexually active at a young age
- they might be promiscuous
- they could use sexual language or know information that [you wouldn't expect them to](#).

Have physical symptoms

- anal or vaginal soreness
- an unusual discharge
- sexually transmitted infection (STI)
- pregnancy.

Worried about a child?

Contact our trained helpline counsellors for 24/7 help, advice and support.

help@nspcc.org.uk

0808 800 5000

Report a concern

Things you may notice

If you're worried that a child is being abused, watch out for any unusual behaviour.

withdrawn suddenly behaves differently

anxious clingy depressed aggressive
problems sleeping eating disorders
wets the bed soils clothes takes risks
misses school changes in eating habits
obsessive behaviour nightmares drugs
alcohol self-harm thoughts about suicide

If you're worried about a child, [contact the NSPCC helpline](#) on **0808 800 5000**.

Find out more about the [signs, symptoms and effects of child abuse](#).

The effects of sexual abuse on children

Sexual abuse can ruin childhood, and the impact can last a lifetime. Although we should remember that every child and situation is different.

What research tells us about the effects of child sexual abuse

Children who are sexually abused experience a range of short and long term symptoms. Research often focuses on physical signs and symptoms but it's often the emotional and psychological effects that cause more harm in the long term.

Nervous system

[Alexander \(2011\)](#) calls sexual abuse a "chronic neurologic disease" and discusses how the effects create decades of negative consequences for victims. The consequences of child sexual abuse can include depression, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress and an impaired ability to cope with stress or emotions ([Allnock et al, 2009](#)).

Child sexual abuse can have a more fundamental effect on brain functioning, where a

child's brain becomes damaged by the abuse they have suffered ([Mizenberg, Poole and Vinogradov, 2008](#)). The effects of sexual abuse can include dissociation, memory impairment and reduced social functioning ([Whitehead, 2011](#)).

Self harm

Self-blame, [self-harm](#) and suicide are commonly mentioned as consequences of sexual abuse. A study by [Calder \(2010\)](#) found participants sexually abused in childhood were more than twice as likely to consider committing suicide in later life.

Sexual health

Being sexually abused as a child, especially when that abuse is not discovered, can lead to confused ideas about relationships and sexual behaviour.

Sexual abuse can also have physical consequences for children, from sexually transmitted diseases to pregnancy. These physical effects add to the significant emotional and psychological damage inflicted by the abuse ([Whitehead, 2010](#)).

Getting help

Children who are sexually abused can be manipulated by their abuser to believe that the abuse is their fault. The feelings of shame and guilt that come from the abuse can reduce the likelihood of that child telling anyone about the abuse ([Allnock, 2009](#)).

Being sexually abused as a child, especially when the abuse is not discovered, can lead to confused ideas about relationships and sexual behaviour.

Some people block out the abuse – meaning that they don't remember parts of their childhood. It can also lead to symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder. If a child doesn't tell anyone about the abuse, if it isn't discovered or when children don't receive the right kind of help and support, the damage can last a lifetime ([Goodyear-Brown, 2012](#)).

Regularly asking children and young people about their wellbeing gives them the space and opportunity to tell when they are ready ([McElvaney, 2015](#)).

Moving on

We know that therapeutic services can help children who have been sexually abused. Our [evaluation of Letting the Future In](#) provides evidence about what works well in the service and what works less well.

Adults who were abused as children

Children who have been [abused or neglected](#) may experience physical or emotional harm. The effects can be short term but sometimes they last into adulthood. If someone has been abused as a child, it is more likely that they will suffer abuse again. This is known as revictimisation.

Long term effects of abuse and neglect include:

- emotional difficulties such as anger, anxiety, sadness or low self-esteem
- mental health problems such as depression, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), [self harm](#), suicidal thoughts
- problems with drugs or alcohol
- disturbing thoughts, emotions and memories that cause distress or confusion
- poor physical health such as obesity, aches and pains
- struggling with parenting or relationships
- worrying that their abuser is still a threat to themselves or others
- learning difficulties, lower educational attainment, difficulties in communicating
- behavioural problems including anti-social behaviour, criminal behaviour.

Working with the National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC)

We've worked in partnership with [NAPAC](#) since December 2012 to help provide 24/7 support to

survivors of child abuse. Our helpline practitioners provide immediate support and advice 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and direct people to NAPAC for further help.

Work or volunteer with children and families?

Visit NSPCC Learning for information, resources and training to help you safeguard and protect children and young people across the UK.

[Go to NSPCC Learning](#)

More information on sexual abuse



Grooming

Children and young people can be groomed online or in the real world, by a stranger or by someone they know - a family member, friend or professional.

[Read more about grooming](#)

Child sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation is a type of sexual abuse in which children are sexually exploited for money, power or status.

[Read more about child sexual exploitation](#)



Harmful sexual behaviour

Children and young people who develop harmful sexual behaviour harm themselves and others.

Read more about harmful sexual behaviour

Further information and advice

Who is affected

Any child can be affected by sexual abuse. Find out more about the risks.

Who is affected by sexual abuse

Helping children who have been sexually abused

How to help keep children safe from child sexual abuse.

Helping children who have been sexually abused

Preventing child sexual abuse

How we can protect children and young people from sexual abuse.

Help prevent sexual abuse



References

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McElvaney, R. (2015) [Disclosure of child sexual abuse: delays, non-disclosure and partial disclosure: what the research tells us and implications for practice](#). Child abuse review (24, 3: 159-169.

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Whitehead, J. (2011) How do children cope with sexual abuse? Protecting Children Update, 84: 9-10.

EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Helplines

Help for adults concerned about a child
Call us on 0808 800 5000

Help for children and young people
Call Childline on 0800 1111

For donation and fundraising queries
Call us on 020 7825 2505

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The NSPCC

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Leading children's charity, incorporated by Royal Charter

Registered charity number 216401. NSPCC, charity registered in Scotland, charity number SC037717. Jersey

registered charity number
AJC179.

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