

## **CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: MYTH vs. FACT**

- 1. MYTH: If a child is sexually abused, his parents or doctor will probably notice the physical signs.**

**FACT: Most sexually abused children have no physical signs.**

Even when kids have physical signs, they usually could indicate problems other than sexual abuse. But we should be alert for any signs of possible abuse – especially physical and behavioral problems that involve the child’s genitals, or that arise suddenly and have no obvious causes.

- 2. MYTH: Child sexual abusers aren’t normal, so they probably won’t look or act normal.**

**FACT: Child sexual abusers may look or act just like anyone else.**

In fact, many of them may appear to be especially responsible and trustworthy. Child sexual abusers work hard to get unobserved, uninterrupted periods of access to children. Abusers know that this depends on their ability to gain the trust of children, parents, and other people and organizations that care for kids.

- 3. MYTH: Child sexual abusers are crazy and will abuse kids at any opportunity.**

**FACT: Most child sexual abusers choose their victims carefully, and spend time establishing relationships with children before abusing them.**

It’s important to be cautious about children’s interactions with strangers. But most abusers aren’t strangers: 90% of abused kids know their abusers. Before sexual abuse begins, an abuser may spend weeks or months “grooming” a child through special attention and setting the stage for uninterrupted one-on-one access.

- 4. MYTH: Incest and other types of child sexual abuse occur mostly in poor or uneducated families.**

**FACT: Child sexual abuse occurs in all types of families.**

About 40% of child sexual abusers are members of their victims’ families. Virtually all child sexual abusers target children to whom they can get easy one-on-one access, especially if a child seems vulnerable to manipulation by the abuser, and can be persuaded to keep the abuse secret. Many people are surprised that child sexual abuse is so widespread: One out of every ten children is sexually abused before age 18. In environments that don’t have adequate safeguards, the proportion may be much higher.

- 5. MYTH: Child sexual abuse is really all about men abusing girls.**

**FACT: Abusers and their victims can be male or female.**

Abusers may be adults, adolescents, or even children who are older or more powerful than their victims. An abuser might victimize boys and/or girls of any age. But this myth does contain some truth: About 90% of abusers are male, and about 60% of victims are female.

- 6. MYTH: Many people who are accused of child sexual abuse are really just teenage boys who get in trouble for having sex with their younger girlfriends.**

**FACT: North Carolina’s laws against child sexual assault exclude most situations of this type.**

For example, a consensual sexual act with an adolescent aged 13-15 constitutes the crime of statutory rape only if the perpetrator is at least 4 years older than the victim (North Carolina General Statutes 14-27.5A). Similarly, the crime of taking indecent liberties with a minor requires that the perpetrator be at least 5 years older than the victim (North Carolina General Statutes 14-202.1).

- 7. MYTH: There is no point in reporting abuse that may have occurred months or years ago.**

**FACT: Even if abuse occurred many years ago, there are usually good reasons to report the abuse to law enforcement and to the county Department of Social Services.**

In North Carolina, child sexual abuse is a felony, and there is no statute of limitations that might protect the abuser from prosecution. Also, the abuser might still be hurting kids. An estimated 5%-10% of abusers will harm more than 40 children before their crimes are stopped. Most abusers don’t simply stop on their own.

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**8. MYTH: Since child sexual abuse is so bad, abused kids usually tell someone about it.**

**FACT: Most sexually abused children don't tell anyone.**

Children may think that they caused the abuse, or that it is somehow normal or acceptable. Abusers will often try to heighten the child's natural confusion and fear. Children may be too ashamed, or too thoroughly manipulated by their abusers, or too afraid of not being believed. They may be too fearful of the pain and disruption that a disclosure of abuse could cause others in the family. They may have been threatened with harm to themselves or to their families if they tell anyone about the abuse.

**9. MYTH: You should be skeptical if children say they are being sexually abused, since kids make up all sorts of stories. They might be just imagining it, or they may be trying to get an innocent adult in trouble.**

**FACT: Kids very rarely make false accusations about being sexually abused.**

Most false accusations occur when children have been coached by someone in authority. For every child who makes a false accusation, there are many, many abused kids who never tell. When children disclose abuse, it is important for them to know that they are believed. It is also important that alleged abuse be brought to the attention of healthcare, social service, and/or law enforcement professionals. The family members of an alleged victim may care deeply about the child, but they generally lack the clinical expertise, legal knowledge, and emotional perspective that are needed to properly investigate possible abuse.

**10. MYTH: Child sexual abuse can always be prevented by the child's parents.**

**FACT: Although parents and other caregivers are responsible for protecting children from sexual abuse, there is no way to absolutely guarantee a child's safety.**

If a child in your care may be suffering from current or past abuse, make sure the child is protected and gets professional help.

**11. MYTH: Children don't need to learn about sexual abuse. If they are too young to understand about sex, they will just be needlessly frightened.**

**FACT: Even very young children can learn things to help them stay safe.**

For example, young children should learn the proper names for all of their body parts. They should know that nobody is allowed to touch their genitals unless it is for purposes of health or cleanliness. Children should know that they have permission to refuse to touch or be touched by others. They should know that it is against the family's rules to keep any secrets about touching from their parents or caregivers.

**12. MYTH: I already keep close tabs on my kids. I teach them about their bodies, and I try to maintain open communication with them. There's not much more I can do.**

**FACT: We can help to protect all kids by creating safer environments.**

For example, we should avoid allowing children to spend time in one-on-one situations that are not observable or at least interruptible by others. We can insist that clubs, churches, day care centers, and other organizations that serve children have policies to prevent and address child sexual abuse. We can talk to other responsible adults about keeping kids safe from sexual abuse. We can think through how we ought to respond if an abused child asks for help. Knowing how to respond can help us to manage our feelings of panic, anger, and distress at the moment when a child desperately needs our help.

**REMEMBER:** Child sexual abusers rely on victims' and caregivers' **LACK OF KNOWLEDGE** and **RELUCTANCE TO TALK**. We don't need money, influence, or even very much time in order to overcome these obstacles in our personal lives. All it takes is a little courage, and a willingness to step up and speak up for children.