



ADVANCING WELLNESS and RESILIENCE in EDUCATION

# Information Brief

## **Sexual Assault/Abuse: Information for Schools, Caregivers, & Peers**

## What is sexual assault/abuse?

Child sexual assault and abuse have been defined in a number of ways by both social agencies and researchers.<sup>3</sup> Some definitions include unwanted sexual experiences perpetrated by both adults and same-aged peers, while other definitions separate the two.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, some definitions include both contact (e.g., unwanted touching by another person) and non-contact experiences (e.g., being shown another person's genitals without consent). Due to differences in definitions, as well as retrospective reporting (i.e., adults report on sexual assault or abuse experiences from their childhoods), child sexual assault and abuse statistics vary widely.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, researchers have conducted nationwide surveys with children (ages 1 month to 17 years) and their families to estimate sexual assault and abuse that occurred in the last 12 months, as well as within the child's lifetime.<sup>2,3,4</sup> These surveys define sexual assault as any sexual victimization perpetrated by either a child or an adult during which there was sexual contact (e.g., rape, unwanted touching). In contrast, sexual abuse was defined as acts perpetrated by either a child or an adult *including sexual assault*, as well as flashing, sexual harassment and statutory sexual offenses (i.e., any sexual contact or non-contact abuse by an adult age 18 years or older perpetrated on a child age 15 years and younger).

## Sexual assault/abuse statistics

**Age.** Statistics provided by the most recent national surveys indicated that within the previous 12 months 7.5 percent of girls and 3.8 percent of boys ages 1 month to 17 years reported experiencing any type of sexual abuse.<sup>4</sup> However, rates of abuse were not the same across all ages. For instance, only 2.1 percent of children ages 6 to 9 years reported sexual abuse in the past 12 months, whereas 16.4 percent of children ages 14 to 17 years reported sexual abuse.<sup>4</sup> Thus, *as children age, they appear to be victimized at higher rates.*

**Gender.** There also were significant differences between perpetration of sexual abuse against male and female children. Of those who reported they experienced sexual abuse in their lifetimes, 11.4 percent were girls and 7.8 were boys ages 1 month to 17 years.<sup>4</sup> However, for ages 14-17 years of age, 34.9 percent (about 1 in 3) of girls and 20.2 percent (1 in 5) of boys reported that they had been sexually abused during their lifetimes.<sup>4</sup> In addition, of the children who reported sexual abuse in the past 12 months, 22.8 percent (about 1 in 5) were girls and 10.3 percent (1 in 10) were boys ages 14 to 17 years.<sup>4</sup> Thus, although rates of victimization increase for both boys and girls as they age, *girls appear to be victimized at higher rates than boys across the lifespan.*

**Perpetrator Type.** A recent study that evaluated lifetime contact sexual abuse experiences (e.g., rape, unwanted touching) of children ages 14 to 17 years found that more than half of the experiences were perpetrated by another person under the age of 18 years of age: the majority of which were peers known to the survivor.<sup>3</sup> Of the experiences perpetrated by adults, the majority were perpetrated by family members or persons known to the child (e.g., a caregiver, neighbor, etc.).<sup>3</sup> Thus, *the majority of children were victimized by either an adult or peer who was known to them.*

## Common myths about sexual assault/abuse

**Myth.** People often falsely accuse others of sexual assault/abuse.

**Fact.** False accusations of sexual assault are extremely rare. Research demonstrates that rates of false reporting are consistent across violent crimes, including sexual assault/abuse.<sup>5</sup>

**Myth.** Sexual assault happens when people drink too much alcohol. If people did not drink as much alcohol, rates of sexual assault would go down.

**Fact.** The consumption of alcohol does not cause sexual assault. However, perpetrators often use alcohol or other drugs to facilitate assault. Additionally, perpetrators often use their own substance use as a strategy to avoid responsibility for their crimes.<sup>5</sup>

**Myth.** Sexual assault happens because people need sex. They get carried away by their sexual desires and/or hormones and lose control.

**Fact.** Sexual assault is violence enacted in a sexual way. Like many other crimes, sexual assault is about power and control.<sup>5</sup>

**Myth.** Most sexual assault/abuse is perpetrated by a stranger.

**Fact.** Research has shown that the majority of sexual assault/abuse is perpetrated by someone known to the survivor.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup>

**Myth.** If a person did not want it to happen, he or she would have said something or fought back. It must have been consensual since there are no bruises or other physical evidence of assault/abuse.

**Fact.** Most people have heard of the “fight or flight” response as a typical response to danger. However, there are actually three responses: fight, flight or freeze. The freeze response is an automatic response (i.e., out of a person’s control) that happens in extremely fearful situations, such as sexual assault or abuse. Research shows that about 50 percent of survivors freeze during an assault. This does not mean the assault/abuse is consensual.<sup>5</sup>

**Myth.** Men/boys can’t be sexually assaulted.

**Fact.** Men/boys also are survivors of sexual assault/abuse. Their perpetrators can be of any gender identity, including both men and women.<sup>5</sup>

**Myth.** Women/girls entice men/boys to sexually assault/abuse them by dressing a certain way or by “leading them on.”

**Fact.** People experience sexual assault/abuse no matter what they are wearing or how they are acting. Perpetrators commit sexual assault because they feel entitled to other people’s bodies and disregard other people’s right to consent. Further, perpetrators often use the excuse of how the survivor dressed or acted to avoid taking responsibility for their own criminal sexual behaviors.<sup>5</sup>

**Myth.** If a man is sexually assaulted by another man, he must be gay or have been “acting gay.”

**Fact.** Regardless of a person’s actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, no one deserves or asks to be assaulted. Saying that someone was “acting gay” is just another excuse perpetrators make to justify their own criminal behaviors.<sup>5</sup>

**Myth.** The survivor had sex with the perpetrator before, so it can’t be sexual assault.

**Fact.** It can be. Consent is an ongoing process. Just because you consent to sex or sexual acts with a person previously does not mean you consent to sex or sexual acts currently or in the future. Further, even after you consent to engage in sex or a sexual act, either person can withdraw consent at any time. Consent must be voluntarily given and cannot be coerced or obtained by force. Once consent is withdrawn, the sexual activity must stop immediately.<sup>5</sup>

## How can you help someone who has experienced sexual assault/abuse?

After experiencing sexual assault/abuse, 85 percent of adolescents reported that they disclosed their experiences to friends or family members. Further, the majority of adolescents who disclosed such experiences reported that they told a peer.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, fewer than 7 percent reported that they disclosed to mandatory reporters such as counselors, teachers, social workers or the police.<sup>1</sup> The reaction that a survivor receives from the first person he or she discloses to significantly impacts whether and how the individual will disclose to other people and/or seek support.<sup>1</sup> Thus, it is important that people understand how to effectively respond to someone who discloses sexual assault/abuse.

**How to Respond to a Survivor: Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN):** RAINN is the nation’s largest anti-sexual violence organization. Its website provides helpful tips about how to talk to someone who discloses sexual assault or abuse. For more information, please visit: <https://www.rainn.org/articles/how-respond-survivor>.

**Helping a Survivor of Sexual Assault: Sexual Assault Prevention & Awareness Center (SAPAC):** SAPAC is a center at the University of Michigan whose goal is to promote healthy relationships, teach non-violence and equality, and support survivor healing. Its website includes a number of resources, including a guide on how to talk to someone who discloses sexual assault/abuse. For more information, please visit: <https://sapac.umich.edu/article/47>.

**What to Do If Your Child Discloses Sexual Abuse: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network:** The National Child Traumatic Stress Network provides helpful tips and additional resources for the parents and caregivers of child sexual abuse survivors. This multi-page pamphlet provides basic information about how to talk to your child, as well as additional reading and resources to continue the recovery process. For more information, please visit: <http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/disclosure.pdf>

## Additional resources for sexual assault/abuse

**RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline:** RAINN provides a free, 24/7, confidential hotline that survivors of sexual assault/abuse can call at **(800) 656-4673**. There also is an option to chat online for individuals who do not feel comfortable disclosing over the phone. The website provides educational materials and statistics about sexual assault/abuse. For more information, visit: <https://www.rainn.org/>.

**The National Child Traumatic Stress Network:** The National Child Traumatic Stress Network provides a number of resources about traumatic experiences a child might be exposed to, ranging from natural disasters to sexual assault/abuse. The website also provides free online training to parents, caregivers and teachers in order to better respond to traumatic incidents children experience. For more information, visit: <http://www.nctsn.org/>.

**National Sex Offender Public Website:** The U.S. Department of Justice National Sex Offender Public Website is a national resource that provides information for families and survivors of child sexual abuse/assault. These resources range from a national registry of registered sex offenders to information about how to create a family safety plan. It also provides a number of resources for survivors of sexual assault/abuse. For more information, please visit: <https://www.nsopw.gov/en/Education>

**National Center for Missing & Exploited Children:** The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children provides a toll-free hotline to report any information about missing or sexually exploited children to the police. This hotline is available throughout the U.S., Mexico, and Canada and can be reached at **(800) 843-5678**.

**Darkness to Light:** Darkness to Light is a toll-free helpline to assist individuals living in the U.S. who need local information and resources about sexual abuse. For more information, please call **(866) 367-5444**.

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***Prepared by Sarah Palasciano-Barton, M.A., Graduate Assistant  
Edited and reviewed by Cricket Meehan, Ph.D., Director  
Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs  
Miami University***