

The Littlest Victims



When Children are the Victims of Sexual Assault

Elbert County Sheriff's Office

Victim Assistance

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Facts about Children who have been victims of sexual assault

Although estimates vary, the statistics are shocking. One in four girls and one in ten boys will be sexually abused by the age of 18.

What is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse is a violation of power. Many times there is no apparent use of force because the offender relies on the child's ignorance.

This crime is a sexual act imposed on a child who lacks the emotional, physical, or mature reasoning ability of an adult. The perpetrator uses his or her powerful and authoritative position to force the child into these acts without concern for the child's age or subordinate position.

The sexual activity can range from disrobing the child to penetration of any bodily opening with a body part of a foreign object. Some children hold on to the idea that they were not forced to engage in intercourse. However, the effects of any act can have the same devastation outcome. Asking a child to have sex is a crime. This crime can range from a single act of exposure or fondling to years of repeated rape.

Relationships of Participants

In approximately 75% of the child sexual abuse cases the perpetrator is known and trusted by the victim. The perpetrator uses his or her position of authority to entice and engage the child often without violence. The child is exploited and the perpetrator misuses his or her power to subtly coerce the child into engaging in these sexual acts.

Remember, children do not seduce adults. Molestation does not happen because of a physical illness nor are the molesters insane. Child molesters are of all nationalities, races, religions, sexual orientations, from all socioeconomic classes and age groups, and both sexes. The molester's use of drugs or alcohol does not justify the offence.

Any child can be victimized. Children rarely lie about molestation. Usually they have more to lose than to gain. One example of this may be when a child was someplace where he or she wanted not

to be. He or she may be more fearful of being punished for breaking the rules than for revealing the abuse. Children fear they may have enticed the molester or that they will not be believed. Children molested by a same sex perpetrator find it even more difficult to reveal the abuse. They fear that others may think they are homosexual or that they should have fought off the perpetrator.

What happens to children who have been Victimized?

What the parents can expect:

The effects of child sexual abuse encompass a wide range of responses, from little or no apparent effects to devastation psychological and physiological harm. Children suffer greater damage when the abuse is perpetrated by a family member over a long period of time where the victim was controlled by secrecy and force. The experience of and the meaning to the child determine the child's response, more than the acts alone. A child who feels powerless, dirty or guilty by the abuse, suffers greater trauma than the child who is unaware of being sexually abused. The child's age may influence how the child responds to the abuse. For example, an adolescent who knows the touching is wrong and can't stop it, may exhibit more trauma symptoms than a preschool child fondled by a relative who is other wise caring to the child. It is not uncommon for children abused very young to develop symptoms many years later when they become aware that what was done to them was wrong.

A child's personal strengths and weaknesses can determine the extent to which sexual abuse is traumatic. Victimization can be interpreted by the child as confirmation of his or her own poor self concept. If the child already suffers low self esteem, due to family stressors, school problems or difficulties in making friends, it is more likely he or she will experience negative symptoms for being sexually abused. Sexual abuse can create feelings of guilt and shame with destructive results to the child's self image.

If you need further information about the progress of the case or services available, contact your local district attorney's office.

Your own notes, information, important people and telephone numbers:

- What is a plea bargain?

Plea bargaining is when the prosecuting attorney offers to let the defendant plead guilty to a less serious crime. It can also mean offering sentencing concessions. There are many options with plea bargains. Usually the prosecuting attorney will consult with the parents of child victims before agreeing to a plea bargain.

- Why is my child angry at me rather than the molester?

Many times the anger is directed toward either the mother or the father because the child is secure with this relationship and knows that his or her mother or father will love him or her and will not abandon him or her no matter what happens.

- Why didn't my child fight, runaway, or at least tell me right away?

Children feel powerless and are taught not to challenge authority. They often do not tell parents for fear that it may actually hurt the parent more to know than not to know. The child also feels guilty for destroying any relationship due to his or her disclosure.

- Will our family ever be the same?

Yes, but you as the parents need to make it happen. Begin by maintaining routines and consistency. This helps both you and your child and gets your family back to normal.



Types of behaviors you may see in your child when he or she is feeling guilty or depressed:

- Sleep disturbances-either sleeping a lot or being unable to sleep.
- Withdrawing from family members or friends.
- Physical symptoms including headaches, vomiting, upset stomach, and hives.
- Teariness
- Loss of concentration and forgetfulness at school and at home.
- Inability to make decisions



How you can help

Learning you child has been molested is a crisis and can feel overwhelming. A child's recovery from molestation depends largely on how well the parent can cope and respond. It is natural to feel outraged. Under this stress it may be difficult to focus on the needs of the child. You can let the child know that you are angry but not at him or her. This helps the child know that he or she is not the cause of your anger.

It is important to stay calm, go slowly and refrain from asking many questions too soon. It is equally important for parents to control their outbursts and overreactions. This is curtail because children tend to blame themselves for their parent's distress and may decide not to share any more information or feelings about what happened in an effort to protect their parents' feelings. The following are some responses which would be helpful and supportive to your child:

- Believe the child and let him or her know you are glad that he or she told you this information.
- Let the child know that you are sorry this happened to him or her.

- Assure the child that you know it is not his or her fault, nor is he or she to blame. It is also important to point out that the child is not responsible for the outcome of any criminal prosecution.
- Inform the child that you will do your best to protect and support him or her through the court system.
- Invite your child to talk about what happened without pressuring him or her to do so.
- Respect the range of feelings that may be expressed. It is normal for your child to feel embarrassed, ashamed, guilty, fearful, and angry as well as relieved.

You may notice some of these other common reactions in your child:

- Nightmares, bedwetting, trouble getting to and staying asleep.
- School problems resulting from an inability to concentrate.
- Not wanting to be alone; clinginess, need for extra reassurance.
- Change in appetite.
- Regressing to a younger developmental stage.

For many parents it is useful to seek help for themselves. You may want assistance to cope with your feelings of shock, powerlessness, guilt and anger as these emotions are often intense. It is not uncommon for parents of victims to have been sexually abused themselves as children. These parents will benefit from their own therapy, by learning to work through their own childhood trauma effectively.

This will enable them to help their own children better. Some parents want to confront the molester themselves upon learning of the crime against their child. This is potentially



not want to go, find out why. With professional help and parental support children can and do recover!

Tips for working with your child's therapist—Be sure to meet with the child's therapist before your child does to describe what you know about the abuse and the noticeable effects on your child. Stress to your child the confidential nature of a therapeutic relationship (that the therapist cannot tell **anyone** what the child tells the therapist). Should there be anything unusual, out of the ordinary, or of concern to you in between sessions, telephone the therapist to discuss it before the next appointment. Because therapy can be difficult and painful it is sometimes tempting to abruptly discontinue therapy. For your child's benefit, it is very important that these feelings are discussed and resolved before ending treatment.

- How do I choose a therapist for either myself or my child?

Your victim advocate can supply you with a referral list of competent child and family therapists and information about the victim compensation fund. It is essential that you ask some questions before engaging in a therapeutic relationship. These questions may include: What is your experience and training in working with sexually abused children and their parents?

Do you have experience with the criminal justice system? How are the parents involved in the child's treatment? Do you believe that children and their families can recover from child sexual abuse?



- How long will my child need therapy?

There is no scientific formula to determine accurately how long your child will benefit from therapy. Many factors may influence healing. The fact that you believe and support your child may help improve his or her progress. It is important to make therapy a priority and to work with the therapist to benefit your child.

Commonly asked questions

- Why did this happen to my child?

There is no answer to this question. All children are perfect victims. Some just have the misfortune to cross the path of a molester without any misconduct on their part.

- Why did the offender do this?

The perpetrator's need becomes more important than the child's. Offenders demonstrate poor impulse control and project blame on everyone and everything, including drugs and alcohol, a seductive child, an unaffectionate wife, etc. Perpetrators are highly manipulative and will avoid taking responsibility for their actions.

- Do children who have been abused grow up to abuse others?

There is some evidence to support that adults who molest children have been molested as children. However, it is important to keep in mind that child victims will not always abuse others as they grow up. A child who receives the appropriate response and attention is unlikely to repeat abusive behavior.

- Wouldn't it be better if we forgot about the whole thing and let my child go on with his or her life?

The solution does sound inviting and easy, however, it doesn't work. If the sexual abuse isn't talked about or dealt with, the child again experiences a secret, and with secrets the child feels at fault and not heard.

- Will my child need therapy?

Therapy can help a child work through the difficult, confusing and painful feelings in a safe setting. It is not recommended to force a child into therapy, rather give them as much control as possible. If the child does

dangerous and confrontations with the perpetrator are better left to the authorities.

Other strategies that can often help parents cope effectively with the crisis at hand while taking care of themselves include:

- Take time for yourselves; this can include taking time to read, visit a friend, or go someplace you particularly enjoy. This time will also help your child by teaching them that everyone deserves time to themselves to take care of themselves as an individual.
- Keep a journal, this can take many forms. You may want to keep a personal record of the events, appointments, interviews, and people involved in the case. A more involved journal where you write your feelings during this time is helpful to many parents.
- Find a support group; this can be through family members, churches or friends. Having a place to ventilate your feelings and to get a reality check can be helpful during stressful times. There are support groups in many communities for parents of children who have been molested.

What happens in Court

It is the state who determines whether criminal charges will be filed against the perpetrator. Police officers do the investigation and the District Attorney's office determines if there is enough evidence to take the perpetrator to court.

There are several different kinds of court hearings in which you and your family may be involved. They usually occur in this order: The Bond Hearing, Preliminary Hearing, Arraignment, Motions Hearing, Trial, Sentencing Hearing. Each of these court activities is described below.

The Bond Hearing

Any person who is taken into custody is entitled to have bail, and the type of bond set by a judge. The purpose of this hearing is to have the judge set the amount of bail and the type of bond. These amounts should be

sufficient to insure that the defendant appears at future court hearings. At this time the judge may also issue a “No Contact” order, thereby prohibiting the alleged molester from having any contact with the victim or the victim’s family. Usually, it is not necessary for the victim or his or her family to attend the Bond Hearing.

The Preliminary Hearing

At this hearing, the judge determines if there is sufficient evidence that the crime was committed, and that the accused is the likely offender. Sometimes the Preliminary Hearing does require testimony by the victim, and witnesses, as well as police, and medical personnel.

The Arraignment

At this hearing, formal charges are read to the defendant. He or she is advised of his or her rights, and what possible sentence may be imposed if convicted of these charges. The defendant is required to enter a plea of guilty or not guilty.

The Motions Hearing

At this hearing the judge rules on various motions (requests) which have been made by the defense lawyer and the district attorney. These motions deal mainly with trial procedures and the admission or suppression of evidence. This hearing may require testimony by the victim and witnesses.

The Trial

Evidence and testimony is presented to a judge and jury. The guilt is determined based on the law and evidence. Testimony is usually required by the victim and witnesses.

The Sentencing Hearing

If the defendant is found guilty, an additional hearing is held to determine the appropriate sentence for the crime. There usually is a presentence investigation and report as well as a victim’s impact statement to help the judge determine appropriate punishment. The victim and witnesses may attend this hearing and may be asked to provide additional information. The victim has the right to speak at the sentencing.

It is difficult for even the most experienced witness to testify in court, so it is best to be prepared. The victim advocate will take the parent and the child victim to the court room to see it before you or your child will have to testify. At this time it may be helpful as well as fun for your child to sit in the judge’s seat, in the jury box and the witness chair. That way the child will be familiar with the room and it will be less intimidating. It will be pointed out where the defense attorney and the defendant will sit in the courtroom. The victim advocate will explain who all the players will be, such as the judge, bailiff, clerk and court reporter.

Your child will meet the prosecuting attorney before the hearing. He or she will establish a relationship with your child and will go over the questions that he or she will be asking your child at the hearing. The prosecuting attorney (deputy district attorney) may explain the types of questions the defense attorney is likely to ask.

The best advice to give a child about how to answer questions by either attorney is to **tell the truth**. Not telling an accurate story or changing any of the details to protect themselves or someone else only confuses the issue and may jeopardize the prosecution. It is perfectly OK for any witness to say “I don’t know” to any question for which the answer is not known rather than guessing or making something up.

The legal process can take in excess of one year to complete which can prolong the trauma to the child and his or her whole family.

Finally, remember that the molester is on trial, not the child or the witnesses. The child did nothing wrong, and in fact was very brave to have come forth to tell what happened to him or her.

