

A Family For Every Child Matching Assistance



*"We should not be asking who this child belongs to,
but who belongs to this child."*

Sexual Abuse

What is sexual abuse?

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) defines sexual abuse as "the interaction between a child and another adult (or child) in which the child is used as sexual stimulation for the perpetrator or observer. Sexual abuse can include both touching and non-touching behaviors".

[\[Source\]](#)

It is hard to pinpoint exactly how many children in foster care are sexually abused, as many will not disclose that information until they feel safe. However, the number is estimated to be large as it is one of the more common types of abuse. Parents should be prepared for the fact that their child may have been exposed to some level of sexual abuse. Below you will learn more about the indicators of sexual abuse, some of the common behaviors of a sexually abused child, how to protect your family from allegations, and the impact of a child's sexual abuse on the family.

Sexual abuse is a topic that makes many families uncomfortable, which is completely understandable. It's a hard topic to discuss or even think about it. But it is an unfortunate reality, and it is something that needs to be addressed. Don't let a child's history of sexual abuse overwhelm or intimidate you. Take in the information below, educate yourself, and consider all the facts before making a decision one way or another.

Some indicators of sexual abuse

The following are some indicators that a child may have been sexually abused. Please note that this is not a complete list, and some of these behaviors may overlap with other forms of abuse:

- Child experiences difficulty in walking or sitting
- Their underwear is torn, stained or bloody

- They have bruises or are bleeding from their private parts
- A child is displaying unusual or sophisticated knowledge or behavior about sex (above and beyond what a child of their age should know)
- Does an unusual amount of sex play with themselves or toys
- Initiates sex play with other kids
- Have poor relationships with their peers
- Unwilling to participate in physical activities
- Overly compliant

Behavioral effects of sexual abuse

The following are some of the effects sexual abuse can have on a child's behavior, and how you should respond. Again, many of these behaviors may stem from other types of abuse as well:

Overly compliant

Behavior: Children are used to being controlled, and may lack assertiveness.

Response: Use open-ended questions and reflective listening to find out what they want in specific situations

Aggressiveness

Behavior: Children who have been sexually abused may be angry, and have not learned the proper ways to display their feelings. As a result, a child may break objects, hurt others, or steal.

Response: Accept their feelings and help the child identify their needs that are related to their underlying feelings. Work with the child on ways to express anger in a healthy and less destructive manner. Make sure to set rules and consequences for destructive and harmful behavior.

"Parentified" behavior

Behavior: Children who have experienced abuse may have a need to act as the parent or caregiver in certain situations, since they most likely had to take on that role before they came into care.

Response: Outline the child's responsibilities, making sure they are related to their developmental stage. Such responsibilities can include setting the table, putting away dishes, cleaning up after the dog, etc. In addition, it is important to organize and encourage age-appropriate play and activities for your child to participate in.

Inappropriate sexual behavior

Behavior: Children may use toys to act out sexual activities, or they may try and engage another child or adult in sexual acts. Children may also have sophisticated knowledge of sex that is above and beyond his/her developmental level.

Response: It is important to model and reinforce appropriate affectionate behavior to your child. Be cautious when it comes to physical expressions of love and affection, making sure that they are not misinterpreted as sexual. Discuss with your child what behaviors are appropriate for certain situations. Reinforce the boundaries and limits regarding relationships with siblings and other children.

Poor peer relationships

Behavior: Victims of sexual abuse may have difficulty making friends. More often than not, these children were never given the opportunities to make friends and they have a skewed sense of what a healthy relationship looks like, so they are socially delayed.

Response: Again, encourage your child to participate in age-appropriate activities where he/she can meet peers of their own age and who share common interests. Work with your child's teachers, coaches, youth pastors and other adults to encourage your child to participate in social activities.

Lack of trust

Behavior: Children who have been sexually abused do not feel safe around anyone, which impedes their ability to form relationships and attachments.

Response: Never make promises you cannot keep; this will only reinforce that they cannot trust anyone. Be honest with your child, and give honest yet developmentally appropriate responses to their questions. Work with your child on becoming aware of his/her needs, and how to meet them in an appropriate fashion. Most importantly, encourage your child to share his/her feelings, but help them also maintain some level of privacy.

Fear of males

Behavior: Sexually abused children may show a generalized fear of males, whether or not a male figure is the one who abused them.

Response: Using reflective listening and effective questioning, help your child identify this fear. Ask your child what you can do to help them feel safe, and provide them with information that will assuage their fears. Based on your child's level of comfort, slowly introduce and encourage healthy, positive interactions with males.

Sleep disturbances

Behavior: Children may have issues revolving around bedtime rituals and sleeping.

Response: Reassure your child that she/he is safe by asking your child what you can do to help him/her feel safe. Do they need a light on in their room? Do they want to sleep with the door shut? Be flexible regarding bedtime routines, and work at your child's comfort level.

Regression

Behavior: A child may behave as though he/she is younger to either redo an earlier developmental stage they feel they missed, or in order to feel safe from a perceived threat.

Response: Work with your child on identifying the underlying feelings for their regressive behaviors. Don't force your child into behaviors that match his/her age; let your child work at their own pace to get back on the developmental track.

Somatic symptoms

Behavior: A child may act sick or become ill to avoid or protect themselves from perceived unpleasant situations or experiences.

Response: Work with your child on identifying the underlying cause for their symptoms, and teach

your child how to use their words to express how they feel.

Depression

Behavior: Children may act sad, withdrawn, or fatigued. A child who was sexually abused may have never experienced joy, which results in them feeling depressed.

Response: Work with your child on identifying their feelings. Encourage the child to be social, and participate in activities/hobbies that you know he/she enjoys.

Self-destructive behavior

Behavior: A victim of sexual abuse may be angry at themselves, and will take this anger out on themselves physically. Behaviors such as hair pulling, head banging, cutting, and suicide attempts are all examples of self-destructive behaviors.

Response: Encourage your child to talk to you about their feelings, and work with them on identifying what those feelings are. If your child is contemplating suicide, make sure to keep items such as pills or weapons in an undisclosed and secure location.

Fire setting

Behavior: A child may become intrigued by matches, setting fires, burning themselves, or just fire in general.

Response: Limit your child's access to items such as lighters or matches. Talk with your child about your concerns regarding their behaviors, and how they impact their safety and other's. Work alongside your child's therapist to focus on what underlying feelings are causing this behavior.

Helping a child who was sexually abused

It is important that parents do not undertake the task of helping their child deal with their past abuse solo. Therapists are key in helping a child work through their past traumas, while you are essential in establishing the fact that your child is safe, and will be loved and nurtured by you. When seeking a therapist, make sure they have a strong background in adoption and child trauma. The following forms of therapy may be beneficial for your child and family:

Individual therapy - This type of therapy may allow your child the freedom to disclose information that he/she may not be comfortable sharing with you yet. Types of individual therapy vary greatly, but some common forms are talk, art, music, or some combination of those. More often than not, a parent or caregiver will also be involved for part of the individual therapy session.

Group therapy - This type of therapy allows your child to meet other children who have gone through similar experiences. This can help your child feel less alone, understand their problems, and learn new skills for dealing with their past abuse, their feelings, and their relationships with family and peers. This type of therapy may also be very beneficial for parents, allowing you to meet other parents who are parenting sexually abused children.

Family therapy - This type of therapy focuses on developing positive parent-child relationships. It will help parents and children develop better communication skills, and assist parents in developing parenting techniques to guide their children's behaviors.

Talk with your child's therapist about what form of therapy will work best for your family and child's situation.

Protecting your family

If you have children or animals already in your home, you may have some concerns about adopting a child who has a sexual abuse history. You may also have concerns, especially if you are male, about a child making false allegations against you. The following suggestions should be followed to ensure the safety and well-being of all members of your home:

- Supervise your children when they are together. This means you will have to remain in the same room while your children are playing, so you can stop a situation before it starts.
- Install door alarms or bells on your child(ren)'s doors so you can hear if they leave their room at night.
- Don't let older children who have been sexually abused babysit your younger children. Conversely, never put any of your children in charge of a sibling who has been sexually abused.
- Set clear boundaries and rules from day one. Examples include one person in the bathroom at the time, clothes or pajamas and a bathrobe must be worn outside the room, respect each other's privacy, etc.
- Be sure you are able to keep an eye on your children playing at all times, and discourage playing in bedrooms or behind closed doors. If your children want to build a fort, for example, make sure that there is an opening where you can see what is going on inside.
- Don't leave your child alone with animals if he/she has been sexually abused.
- Before taking a placement, talk to your children about what they should do if their sibling discloses information about their abuse, or tries to touch them in an inappropriate manner.

Children who were victims of sexual abuse may make false allegations against a member of your family. This is most likely to occur if they are angry with you or do not agree with a house rule, for example. They may also make an allegation if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe. The following are some suggestions for ways you can prevent allegations from being brought upon you:

- Create strong boundaries and rules. Examples include no nudity around the house;

clothes are to be changed behind closed doors; no children are ever allowed in the master bedroom; one person is allowed in the bathroom at a time, etc. Make sure to enforce these rules and model them yourself.

- Be aware of who abused the child. For example, if the child's father was the perpetrator, don't let a male member of your family be alone with your child.
- Practice "the rule of 3". Allegations are more likely to be made if you are one-on-one with your child, and no one else is there to bear witness to you. This is especially likely if the child is left alone with a person of the same sex as their abuser. While your child adjusts to your home and learns to trust you and your family, try and avoid situations where you are alone with the child. Overtime as your child becomes comfortable with you and feels safe, you can slowly introduce situations where you and your child can do activities alone together.
- Let the child set their own boundaries. For example, let them decide if they would like your help in getting dressed or cleaned up, or when they want to be hugged or kissed.
- Never make your child feel trapped in a room. Be mindful of where you are standing in relation to the door (make sure you are not blocking it, for example), and never be in the room with your child with the door shut (unless you are in the bathroom, helping them shower).

The impact of sexual abuse on a family

A child's past sexual abuse will have an impact on your family. Adopting and parenting a child who was a victim of sexual abuse can be stressful and create tension. It requires more supervised parenting, and changes to family routines. It also requires a family to be more open about issues surrounding sex and sexuality. It is important that parents face the challenges together, and with consistency; parents also need to address the issues equally.

Your child may want to talk to you about their past and what they experienced. If that is the case, encourage your child to talk to you in private. As difficult as it may be, try and reserve judgement and your own personal feelings. Let the child know that they are safe. It may be necessary for you to seek therapy too, to talk about what your child has disclosed to you. If you were the victim of sexual abuse, make sure you are prepared to deal with residual feelings that may arise when your child discloses information about their past.

Your children may be exposed to conversations about sexual abuse, which may be confusing or challenging for them. Your child may also disclose information to your other children, giving them exposure to sexual conversations. As a parent, you will feel extremely protective of your other children, and work to shield them from any sort of harm. You will instead need to find a balance between over-protection and reasonable worry. Discuss with your children strategies for standing up for themselves, make sure they know they are in charge of their bodies, and keeping an open line of communication are all great strategies to employ to help you and your

family feel secure.

The best way to help your child overcome their sexual abuse history is to create a safe and structured environment, and seek the help of professionals. A healthy relationship between you and your child will allow them to feel safe and secure, and begin the recovery process.

Resources

For more information on parenting a child who was sexually abused, check out the following free resources:

Child Welfare Information Gateway - [Parenting a Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents](#)

Child Welfare Information Gateway - [Identification of Sexual Abuse](#)

NCTSN - [Child Sexual Abuse Fact Sheet](#)

National Center on Sexual Behavior of Youth - [Children with Sexual Behavior Problems: Common Misconceptions vs. Current Findings](#)

American Humane Association - [Child Sexual Abuse](#)

Lunch-N-Net - Season 2, Episode 5: ["The One About Caring for Children Who May Have Been Sexually Abused"](#). Click on the link, click "Past Episodes" on the right, and choose Season 2, Episode 5 to watch the video.

Child Matching Events

Child Matching Events are a great way to connect one-on-one with a child's caseworker to introduce your family to the worker, and learn more about the children on their caseload! Families are required to pre-register and must have a current home study to participate. You can learn more about our upcoming matching events and register [here](#).

Upcoming Child Matching Events:

**If you don't see any children listed on the event page, please continue to check back for updates. If you have any questions about our Matching Events, please contact our Recruitment Coordinator Lisa Kinser-Wehr at lisa.kinser@afamilyforeverychild.org

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