

# Parenting the Sexually Abused Child

Rockford Sexual Assault Counseling

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# What is Child Sexual Abuse?

- Any sexual act with a child by someone older in an authority position
- May include but not limited to:
  - Sexual touch (clothed or unclothed)
  - Oral sex
  - Penetrative sex (can happen... at any age)
  - Encouragement of child to touch themselves
  - Sexual activity in front of children (intentionally)
  - Exposing child to pornography
  - Prostitution

# Facts About Sexual Abuse/Assault

- A adult woman is raped every three minutes
- One in three females will be sexually assaulted by age 18
- One in six males will be sexually assaulted by age 18
- Ninety percent of sexually assaulted children are assaulted by someone they know
- Sexual assault is a violent abuse of power
- Just because a case is not criminally charged, or indicated by DCFS DOES NOT mean that it did not happen

# What Factors Influence Impact of Trauma?

- Age of child
- Duration of abuse
- Frequency of abuse
- Intrusiveness of abuse
- Degree of force
- Relationship of abuser to child
- How long before the child tells/if the child tells
- If they are believed when they tell
- High level of family functioning, maternal support (if abuser is not in the home)

# What is Normal Sexual Development in Children?

- Sexuality is a part of every human regardless of age
- Most children learn about sexuality through exploration and play including gender roles and behaviors
- Natural and healthy sexual exploration may result in embarrassment but does not usually leave children with feelings of shame, anxiety and/or guilt

# Normative Sexual Development Preschool Ages 0-5

- Common:

- Sexual language relating to differences in body parts
  - Bathroom talk
  - Pregnancy and birth
- Showing and looking at private parts
- Around age 4 children notice difference in sex organs
- Plays house/doctor
- Random self-exploration of genitals

- Uncommon:

- Specific reference to sexual acts
- Contact experience with other children
  - After being told “no” repeatedly child is not redirected
- Bowel issues after being potty trained
  - Loss of bowels, smearing feces
- Frequently plays Doctor or house and introduces sexual activity repeatedly

# Normative Sexual Development

## School Age Ages 6-12

- Common:

- Questions about...
  - Menstruation, pregnancy, sexual behavior
- “experimenting” with same age children including kissing, fondling, and role-playing
- Masturbation at home and other private places
- Need for privacy
- “You show me I’ll show you”
- Talks about sex with friends or having a girlfriend or boyfriend (10-12)

- Uncommon:

- Gets caught “peeking” or watching others doing bathroom functions
- Masturbates in public even after being told “no”
- Sexualizes all relationships

# Normative Sexual Development Adolescence Ages 13-16

- Common:

- Questions about:
  - Decision-making, social relationships, sexual customs
- Masturbation in private
- Experimenting between same age adolescent including kissing, fondling, and body rubbing
- May be sexually active
  - 40-85% of children will become sexually active before age 13

- Uncommon:

- Withdrawal from social or romantic relationships
- Masturbation in public
- Increased anxiety, shame, or guilt about sex topics



# Trauma Responses in Children

- Every single child has their own unique response to trauma. Even children with similar exposure to trauma can have completely different trauma responses. This information is a general compilation of responses that are common in children that have been sexually abused

# Trauma Responses in Children

- Depression
- Self injury
- Generalized fear/anger
- Bedwetting/Bowel issues (or regression in potty training)
- Anxiety, hyper vigilance
- Inappropriate sexual touch and/or talk
- Distorted body image
- Lacks trust in others or struggles to keep boundaries
- Bedwetting
- Sexualized Behaviors
- Regression to an earlier stage of development
- Somatic complaints
- Difficulty in relationships with friends/family
- Struggles with control
- Nightmares and/or sleep disturbances
- Aggression
- Difficulty expressing feelings

# RSAC Play Therapy

- Play therapy is opportunity for children to process their feelings regarding the abuse in a safe and non-threatening manner
- RSAC does not play any kind of role in investigation
- Children do not need to talk about the abuse in order to process through the abuse and reduce their symptoms
- Common play therapy items are dolls, art, puppets, sandtray and playdough
- Can be a long process depending on the child's readiness

# Words We Use at RSAC

- Helpers... any person the child identifies as someone they can go to when they need help. Ex: firemen, doctors, police officers, parents, foster parents, teachers, etc
- Good touches... touches that make us feel good. Ex: high fives, hugs, kisses (when we WANT these touches)
- Hurtful touches... anything that hurts us. Ex: hitting, kicking, biting, punching, etc
- Secret touches... when someone touches our privates or asks us to touch their privates. The person might ask us to keep it a secret. These touches are not good or bad because a secret touch can feel good OR bad.
- We also use proper private part body terms for many reasons. Ask your therapist to discuss and help you become comfortable using the proper terms as well. (The mouth is a private part as well).

# Secret Versus Private

- A main concept used at RSAC is to help the child distinguish between things that are kept secret and things that are to be kept private
- Many times abusers tell the child to keep the abuse “secret” and threaten the child if they tell
- Privacy... a decision you make to keep things to yourself because it’s about something personal that others don’t need to know about
- Secrecy... is a decision you make to hide things that happen, your thoughts, or your feelings from some people and not others
- Talk to your child about the difference and make sure to tell them to tell you if ANYONE asks them to keep a secret from you that makes them feel uncomfortable. THAT is the time to tell.
  - For a birthday party secret... use the word surprise instead of secret

# Boundaries

- Set boundaries, exaggerated, if anything
- Allow children to have some control over things that don't matter. Ex: which vegetable to have with dinner, but still maintaining the rules of the home
- Provide children with reminder that if they need someone to talk to, you (or if you are unable, name other helpers) are available when they need to talk
- Remind children that everyone has boundary bubbles around their body and some people don't like to be touched

# Body Boundary Rules

- No one touches or looks at your private parts
- You don't touch or look at anyone else's private parts
- If someone does, tell a helper right away
- If that helper doesn't listen, tell another helper until someone listens
- We only touch our private parts in private, and not in public

# Side Notes

- Technology
  - It is important to note the use of technology in a child's life
  - Many children will turn to Google in order to learn what a word that they heard at school means
  - Normalize the curious behavior and then talk to them about the word or action yourself
  - Limit access to technology and set parent controls
- Visit our website
  - Visit our website to learn more about these things as well as other resources
- Significant other therapy is available for you as well free of charge





- Resources

- Cavanaugh Johnson, T. (2011). Understanding children's sexual behaviors: What's natural and healthy. Institute on Violence, Abuse and Trauma. San Diego, California.
- RSAC fact sheet. (unknown). Normal sexual development in children and youth. RSAC.
- Gil, E., Shaw, J. (2011). *A book for kids about private parts, touching, touching problems, and other stuff*. Self Esteem Shop. Royal Oak, Michigan.
- Stop It Now!. (2002). Warning signs about child sexual abuse. [Stopitnow.com/warnings.html](http://Stopitnow.com/warnings.html)
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- Pauley, Michelle (2022). Parenting the sexually abused child. RSAC

[RockfordSexualAssaultCounseling.org](http://RockfordSexualAssaultCounseling.org)

