

Why Are Children Vulnerable To Sexual Abuse?

- children may feel powerless
- uninformed children trust all adults
- not all children are capable of assessing adult's motives
- children are taught that goodness equates with obedience to adults
- children are curious about their own bodies and sexuality
- children may be deprived of basic information about their sexuality
- children may not realize what abusive behavior is or that it is wrong
- sexual abuse is often presented as evidence of affection
- children may also be at risk from peers and siblings
- children are often confused about sexual misbehavior
- children are seldom encouraged to express their anxieties and fears
- children may not realize that they can say no to adults, especially those in authority

What To Do When a Child Reports Abuse

- put your own feelings aside trying not to communicate shock, disgust, embarrassment, or disbelief. Be calm and supportive
- never agree to a child's request that "if I tell you, promise you won't tell anyone?"
- seek privacy so that the child is protected from disclosing in public
- assure the child that he/she did the right thing by telling and that you believe him/her
- try not to lead the victim even if he/she has difficulty in the telling or is non-verbal. let her/him tell his/her own story, in his/her own words as much as possible
- never blame the victim or make judgments about what happened
- try not to say things that might make the victim feel guilty or inadequate (eg "why didn't you say 'no' ")
- try not to speak badly of the abuser. Remember this could be the child's parent whom he/she nonetheless loves
- remember, it is not up to you to *investigate* or elaborate on the child's story. You need only have *suspicion* to report
- tell the child that you want to help but to do so you will need to tell those who can be of help. Tell the child that other professionals may also need to talk with him/her about it.

- assure the child that someone will stand by him/her in the process of getting help... if not you then another trusted staff member/parishioner
- report the abuse to the Safety Response Team those individuals specified in your protocol. If you feel that the child is in immediate danger, be sure to share these concerns
- these concerns may also need to be reported to CPS. Again, if you feel that the child is in immediate danger, be sure to share these concerns
- the child's report should be discussed only with authorized people and not with other children or uninvolved adults. It is important to tell only people who are required to know. The child has a right to confidentiality
- stay close (or arrange for someone else to do so) to the child immediately after disclosure to provide some sense of physical security.
- maintain a normally responsive interaction with the child after the disclosure being sensitive to the child's need to talk
- recognize that this process may cause conflicted feelings in you. Be aware that you also may need to process your feelings. Be careful that who you choose to do this with maintains the child's confidentiality and yours

A QUICK REFERENCE TO SEXUAL ABUSE

Children who have been sexually abused, exhibit a variety of symptoms including the following:

- painful urination
- excessive bathing
- frequent vomiting
- excessive sore throats (may be indicative of gonorrhea)
- chronic or excessive masturbation
- reports of frequent urinary tract infections
- difficulty in walking or sitting
- evidence or reports of genital/anal itching, rashes, pain, swelling or burning
- reports of frequent yeast infections
- other symptoms of venereal disease such as vaginal or penile pain or discharge, genital or oral sores, genital warts
- early pregnancy
- frequent psychosomatic illnesses

. Behaviorally children may exhibit:

- exceptional secrecy
- more sexual knowledge than is appropriate for the child's age (especially in younger children)
- evidence of in-depth sexual play with peers (in younger children, different from the normal "playing doctor" form of exploration)

- approach or accost adults sexually
- promiscuity especially at a young age
- withdrawal or over aggressiveness
- inordinate fear of males (or females)
- exhibit extreme seductiveness
- does not want to participate in activities with others especially if they involve undressing (eg. changing into swim suits)
- reported sleep problems or nightmares
- crying without provocation
- suddenly becomes afraid or phobic about certain things or situations
- expresses little self-worth, talks of being damaged
- seems pseudo-mature, appearing much older and more worldly than peers
- attempts suicide or expresses ideas of wanting to kill self
- runs away from home excessively
- is extremely cruel to animals (especially those that would normally be pets)
- sets fires
- exhibits symptoms of an eating disorder
- cuts, scratches to draw blood or self mutilates in other ways