

Protecting Our Children from Sexual Abuse

Overview

Child sexual abuse and assault currently affect 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 20 boys in the United States before they reach age 18.¹ The effects of child sexual abuse and assault are traumatic, long lasting, and costly. Although rates of sexual abuse declined during the 1990s, they've plateaued in recent years,² suggesting a renewed effort is needed to protect children. New policies that result in smart investments in prevention programs, research, and education are needed to ensure that our children are safe, healthy, and successful in school and have productive and rewarding futures.

Who Is Affected?

The number of reported cases of child sexual abuse can vary widely, depending on the definition of abuse used and the system collecting and reporting the data. However, the most recent data suggest that 26.6% of girls and 5.1% of boys in the US experience sexual abuse or assault.¹ Overall, it's estimated that a child is sexually abused every eight minutes in the U.S.⁴

Child sexual abuse affects children from all socioeconomic levels. However, research suggests that several subgroups of children are at heightened risk of victimization, including LGBTQ youth,⁵ youth in foster care,⁶ children with physical and mental disabilities,^{7,8} and homeless and runaway youth.^{9,10}

Perpetrators of child sexual abuse and assault are most typically:

- Male (more than 90%)¹¹
- A person known to the child (approximately 50%)¹¹
- A member of the child's family (approximately 25–33%)¹¹
- Over age 18 (76.8%), although it's important to note that nearly 20% of perpetrators are between ages 12 and 17¹²

Impact of Abuse

Children who experience sexual abuse suffer the effects throughout their lives. Children and youth who are sexually abused are more likely to experience feeling powerless and unable to control their lives;¹³ to exhibit behaviors such as depression, bulimia, obesity, and anorexia,¹³ as well as delinquency and heavy drinking;¹³ to experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as anxiety and violent behavior;¹³ and to need special education services.¹⁴

The average lifetime cost per victim of sustained child abuse of any kind is \$210,012, which includes loss of earnings, higher health care costs, child welfare and criminal justice costs, and special education costs.¹⁵

Prevention Efforts

Research shows that the two most effective ways to prevent abuse are education and training of adults and skills training in children.¹⁶ When school-based programs are used in conjunction with parental involvement, they produce more benefits than either does individually.¹⁶

When training adults, the goals are to give them the knowledge and skills to identify the signs of abuse, make appropriate referrals, and to create strong bonds that encourage communication with children. Research shows that when parents or other caring adults teach children about sexual abuse, they decrease the likelihood that the child will be victimized.¹⁶

According to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, "Child sexual abuse involves inducing or coercing a child to engage in sexual acts. It includes behaviors such as fondling, penetration, and exposing a child to other sexual activities"¹³ (such as flashing, masturbation, peeping, or pornography).

When focusing on children, the goals are to increase their knowledge and use of strategies that prevent victimization, and to create an empowering atmosphere that leads to increased disclosure rates.¹⁶ Studies indicate that the likelihood of a child reporting abuse is a significant deterrent to perpetrators,¹⁷ and perpetrators may be less likely to victimize a child with high self-esteem who appears less vulnerable.¹⁸

Policy Recommendations

The most cost-effective policies that reduce child sexual abuse are prevention efforts, and the most effective prevention efforts occur when children receive a school-based prevention program in conjunction with the involvement of a caring adult.

The National Coalition to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation has developed six pillars of prevention¹⁹ to guide policymakers toward effective policies. Based on these pillars and a broad understanding of the research on child sexual abuse, Committee for Children recommends the following policy efforts:

- Advocate for funding to support both proven prevention strategies and research to evaluate promising prevention practices.
- Support research and targeted cultural messaging and outreach to at-risk populations. Also, implement culturally appropriate reporting mechanisms that would empower communities at risk to recognize and report abuse and seek help.
- Develop a broad, national education program identifying the signs of child sexual abuse and the steps to prevent it. Incorporate a two-generational approach that targets the child and the child's parents/caregivers.
- Develop a national Technical Assistance Center that, at a minimum, provides information on evidence-based programs and practices.

Who We Are

Committee for Children (CFC), is a global nonprofit dedicated to fostering the safety and well-being of children through social-emotional learning and development. CFC is the world's largest provider of research-based educational programs that promote social-emotional skills and prevent bullying and sexual abuse.

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