

Protecting Children and Adolescents from Sexual Abuse

Facts About Sexual Abuse and Sexual Abusers

The purpose of this pamphlet is to help you protect your children and adolescents from sexual molestation. Here you will find accurate information about the people who may molest children and adolescents and the situations in which molestation is most likely to take place.

What is meant when we talk about sexual abuse of children or adolescents?

The sexual abuse of a child or adolescent involves any sexual activity between a child or an adolescent under the age of 14, and an adult. Such behaviour is against the law in every part of Canada. If the adolescent is between the age of 14 and 18 and the adult is in a position of authority or trust, or if the behaviour is forced on the adolescent, it is also considered abuse and is against the law.

When the sexual activity is between two children or adolescents, it will depend on the difference in their ages and whether or not the behaviour was forced. Children under the age of 12 cannot be charged with a sexual offence. However, even very young children may behave in a 'sexually intrusive' or 'sexually aggressive' manner that is abusive and needs to be addressed by someone with special training.

Sexual abuse involves touching and non-touching behaviours.

Touching behaviours include:

- Touching a child or adolescent on their genitals (penis, testicles, vagina, breasts or anus) for a sexual purpose.
- Getting a child or adolescent to touch someone else's genitals, or playing sexual games.
- Putting objects or body parts (like fingers, tongue or a penis) inside the vagina, in the mouth, or in the anus of a child or adolescent, for a sexual purpose.

Non-touching behaviours include:

- Showing pornography to a child or adolescent.
- Exposing a person's genitals to a child or adolescent.

Non-touching behaviours include *(continued)*

- Photographing a child or adolescent in a sexual pose.
- Encouraging a child or adolescent to watch or listen to sexual acts, either in person or on a video.
- Watching a child or adolescent undress or use the bathroom without their knowledge (known as voyeurism or 'peeping').

Who sexually abuses children and adolescents?

- Many people think of child molesters as people who hang around playgrounds or cruise neighbourhoods in their cars, trying to lure victims by offering rides or treats. Although it is true that some abusers do this, the majority (approximately 80 to 90 per cent of all cases) of children and adolescents who are sexually abused, are abused by someone they know or is known by their family. Slightly less than 50 per cent of these children and adolescents are abused by someone in their family. The remainder are abused by acquaintances (neighbours, coaches, teachers, religious leaders, babysitters and others).
- About one third of children who are sexually molested, are molested by someone under the age of 18 (often by older children in the family or neighbourhood, older playmates or a babysitter).
- Eighty per cent of the time, males do the abusing. Females are the abusers about 20 per cent of the time.

The available information about the people who sexually abuse children tells us that it is more likely to be someone who you or the victim knows, and who you would be unlikely to suspect, than a stranger who goes on the prowl looking for victims.

It is hard to face the fact that someone you know, or even like, might be a sexual abuser.

Why do people sexually abuse?

In order to protect your children and adolescents, it is helpful to know something about the different reasons why people commit acts of sexual abuse, and the situations in which these acts are most likely to take place.

Some people have a stronger sexual interest in children or adolescents than in adults. They may get aroused by the idea of sex with a child or adolescent or they may crave the feeling

of power that they get from being able to molest them. These are the abusers who go looking for someone to molest, but who make up only a small percentage of the people who have sexually abused a child or adolescent. They usually have many victims over a long period of time. Often, they get access to their victims by befriending the child or adolescent's parents and offering to take the victim places or to babysit. They may also take on a volunteer role working with children and adolescents. They are usually unmarried, don't seem to have many adult relationships (other than those that give them access to their victims) and often have a history of moving from one community to another (frequently to avoid detection or prosecution by the law). Abusers who usually target pre-pubertal children (a child who has not started to develop the sexual characteristics of an adult body) is called a pedophile. An abuser who usually targets pubertal children (adolescents) is called a hebephile.

More often, children and adolescents are sexually abused by someone who prefers to have a close, intimate, relationship with someone in their own age group. The abuser doesn't usually have sexual feelings towards someone who is too young, but turns to the child or adolescent as a 'substitute' for the peer relationship that they would like to have. The relationship with the victim may start out normally, but as the abuser starts to feel close to the victim and to get some of their need to feel accepted by them met, they 'sexualize' the relationship. They may start to think of the victim as their lover, boyfriend, or girlfriend, and to see the victim as having more maturity than is the case. Often, they will convince themselves that the victim enjoys the sexual activity. The sexual behaviour with the victim is usually an attempt to make the feelings of closeness and acceptance more intense. These are the abusers who are hard to spot.

RED FLAGS

You should be concerned if there is someone who is paying more attention to your child or adolescent than to anyone in their own age range; who seems to want to dominate them (keep them from spending time with people their own age); or who seems to be treating them as though they were someone older. Very often, parents of a child or adolescent who has been sexually abused by such a person will say that they found the abuser's interest in the victim a bit strange, but found it hard to believe that this was the 'kind of person' who would do such a thing.

Sometimes, children or adolescents are molested by someone who has difficulty separating physical intimacy (physical contact with another person, such as hugging, tickling, massaging, or sitting close to someone) from sexual intimacy (having contact with the sexual parts of someone). Such a person may tend to have either: no physical contact with other person, or physical contact that leads to sexual contact, with nothing in between. Any physical contact with a person of the preferred sex may lead to their becoming sexually

aroused, whether they want to get aroused or not. Children, especially young children, are very physical (sitting on knees, wanting to be hugged or tickled, etc) and even adolescents may like to wrestle with or be tickled by adults, with whom they have a close relationship. Sometimes in these situations an adult, who would not normally sexually molest someone, gets sexually aroused and 'impulsively' (without giving much thought to what they are doing) touches the victim in a sexual way. This is more likely to happen if the abuser has been drinking. Although alcohol doesn't cause a person to behave in an unacceptable way, it has the effect of 'disinhibiting' our behaviour. This means that the alcohol makes behaviour that would normally seem unacceptable, dangerous, or foolish, seem okay.

Choosing A Babysitter or Care giver

AVOID RISKY SITUATIONS

Someone who finds that they are easily aroused by physical contact with another person should be very careful about having close physical contact with a child or adolescent. They should be careful to avoid any accidental or non-sexual contact with the child or adolescent's genitals and should take immediate steps to leave the situation if they start to feel sexually aroused.

A common situation in which children are sexually molested is with teenage babysitters. This is most likely to happen with a teenager, who hasn't had much sexual experience but who wouldn't normally think of someone who they are babysitting in a sexual way, has to help with the child who they are babysitting to get changed for bed or with using the toilet. While doing this, the teenager may realize that there is an opportunity to find out what genitals look like, or what it feels like to touch someone in sexual way. The teenager may 'impulsively' (without giving much thought of what they are doing or the consequences) do something sexual with the child. Immediately afterwards they may realize the seriousness of what they did and regret it, but it is too late. This sort of molestation may happen with either male or female babysitters.

TALKING ABOUT “OK TOUCHING” AND “BAD TOUCHING”

One way to reduce the likelihood of sexual molestation taking place is to make certain your babysitter knows that you have spoken to your child about the difference between okay touching and sexual or “bad” touching. This discussion can take place with your babysitter as part of a routine checklist with a sitter - your child’s bedtime, favourite story book, where you can be reached, etc. This approach will cushion feelings of embarrassment or of being under suspicion. It will also get your babysitter thinking about the whole issue of child molestation and its consequences. In this way, a babysitter is less likely to act impulsively when, or if, they have a sudden sexual thought or feeling involving your child.

In all cases, a person who sexually molests a child or adolescent is making a choice to commit a sexual offense. They know that it is wrong. They are abusing the power that they have over the victim in order to satisfy their own desires.

Signs that Someone May Have Deviant Sexual Behaviour Problems

Someone who you love may be acting in a way that worries or confuses you. These behaviours may be a sign that this person needs help. Many people with deviant sexual behaviour problems wish that someone had asked them what was going on or had told them where to get help before it was too late.

Do you know someone who?

- Insists on bathing a child who is old enough to bathe his or herself?
- Arranges to share a bed with a child during an overnight stay?
- Insists on hugging, kissing, tickling, wrestling with or holding a child even when the child does not want this affection?
- Shows an excessive interest in the sexuality of a particular child or teen (ie, talks repeatedly about the sexual activities or developing body of a child or adolescent?)
- Spends most of his/her spare time with children and has little interest in spending time with people their own age?
- Regularly offers to babysit many different children and has little interest in spending time with people their own age?
- Buys children or teens expensive gifts or gives them money for no apparent reason?
- Frequently walks in on children or teens when they are in the bathroom?

- Talks about sexual fantasies involving children and adolescents, or makes comments that suggest that children and adolescents are interested in sex with adults?
- Encourages secrets in a child?
- Looks at child or adolescent pornography?
- Asks adult partners to dress or act like a child or teen during sexual activity?
- Often has a 'special' child or adolescent friend, which maybe a different one from year to year?
- Makes fun of a child or teen's body parts, calls them sexual names such as 'stud', 'whore', or 'slut'?

These may be signs that the person has a sexual behaviour problem and that there is a risk that they may sexually molest a child or adolescent, if they have not already done so. If you do not know how to approach this person, or if you are this person and realize that you need help, **please call 368-6391**. The person at this number has been trained to help people with deviant sexual behaviour problems and their families. People who sexually molest children can be helped, but they have to want to change and require specialized treatment.

Reducing Your Child's Risk of Sexual Abuse

Some children are more at risk for being sexually abused. Below are some of the things that you can do to reduce the risk that your child will become the target of sexual abuse.

- Talk to your child about the difference between 'good touch' and 'bad (sexual) touch,' using plain, direct language that they are able to understand. With young children, a good approach is to tell them that the parts of the body covered by their bathing suits are private and that it is not okay for anyone to touch them there, or to ask to be touched there. You should explain that there are some exceptions to this, such as being examined by a doctor, being bathed by a parent (if they are young enough to need help), etc. There are some good books and videos that are designed to help you teach your child about bad touch and about what to do if someone touches them in a sexual way. Your local library, book store or film board will probably have copies of these that you can borrow.

- Teenagers may also become the victims of unwanted sexual behaviour. However, they tend to have difficulty believing that they would ever be in a situation where they might be sexually assaulted or in which they couldn't handle it. Albeit, they need to be warned about how sexual assault happens. In particular, they need to be warned against situations in which someone they trust, such as a teacher, coach, religious leader or family member, might start to make them feel important and grown-up by treating them like an adult. Such a person may offer them alcohol or drugs (this is an approach that is often used by people who molest teenagers), comment on how handsome or pretty they are and may ask them questions about their sexual activity. In order for a teen to take these warnings seriously, they need to know that when a person is faced with a situation that is threatening and unexpected, they tend to freeze up. When this happens, a person has difficulty thinking clearly about what is happening or about what to do to protect themselves. Many teens that have been sexually assaulted went along with the assault, or failed to resist, because they couldn't think of what to do at the time. Being prepared for the possibility of a sexual assault and thinking, in advance, about what to do if this happens will help your teen to protect themselves if someone tries to sexually molest them.
- Making your child less vulnerable to sexual molestation is part of the bigger job of giving them a sense of confidence, security, privacy and control over their own bodies. Children with low self-esteem, who crave attention from strangers, and who don't feel they can say 'NO' to an adult, are much more likely to be targeted by an adult who seeks out children in order to sexually molest them. Such children are also much more likely to go along with the abuse because they crave the attention and rewards that such a person gives them, or because they do not feel that there is anyone they can turn to for protection. Listening to your child and treating their concerns and feelings with respect; teaching them about privacy; giving them lots of positive attention; making certain that they know that you are there to help them if someone makes them feel bad, are all things that will reduce the risk that your child will be a victim of sexual abuse. These feelings will also make your child more likely to tell you right away if someone approaches them in a sexual manner.

It only takes a matter of seconds to sexually molest a child. Parents who have no reason to suspect that someone is a child molester are unlikely to notice it happening. It can even happen when others are watching.

REMINDER!

It is important to remember that most adults have a genuine, healthy interest in children that is not likely to lead to their sexually molesting a child. Although you should use some caution when you notice an adult or older child, who seems to be taking an excessive or unusual interest in children, it would be wrong to jump to the conclusion that such a person is a child molester.

Where to Find Help

As a parent, you know your child better than anyone else. If you notice a change in your child that causes you to be concerned or that makes you think that they may have been sexually abused, there are professionals you can call for advice.

If you think a child may have been sexually abused:

Child & Family Services (Department of Social Services and Seniors):

Montague	838-0703
Souris	687-7060
Charlottetown	368-5330
Summerside	888-8100
O'Leary	859-8811
After Hours	1-800-341-6868

If you have questions about sexual abusers and are looking for help:

Sexual Deviance Assessment / Treatment Program	368-6391
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Assistance for victims who are dealing with the justice system:

Victim Services

Charlottetown	368-4582
Summerside	888-8217

If you are generally concerned about problems with your child or adolescent or about changes in their behaviour:

Community Mental Health Services

Charlottetown	368-0960
Summerside	888-8180
Montague	838-0782
Souris	687-7110
West Prince	853-8670

For information about support for victims of sexual abuse:

Self-Help Clearing House	368-1648
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This publication was prepared by Randall Fletcher, Sexual Deviance Specialist,
Community and Correctional Services Division, Office of the Attorney General

Endorsed by the Provincial Child Sexual Abuse Advisory Committee

The Provincial Child Sexual Abuse Advisory Committee gratefully acknowledges
STOP IT NOW! for allowing reproduction of portions of their resource "*Child Sexual
Abuse: Facts About Abuse and Those Who Might Commit It*"

2002

