

Challenging Myths About Sexual Abuse

Adults who were abused as children will tell you one of the most damaging effects of childhood abuse is not being believed when they tried to tell someone, either as an adult or a child. There are many misconceptions about sexual abuse. They are often perpetuated by abusers, because that gives power and stability to their secret. These can also come from well meaning friends and professionals who are not knowledgeable about abuse. Many survivors try to no avail to get people close to them to understand the facts. It's really not their job. It is our job, as those linked in support to shed the secrecy and mistruths about sexual abuse.

Myth

Children cannot be believed. Most stories about sexual abuse are "planted" by another adult with a revenge motive. Or, the child is just trying to get attention.

Reality

Research proves again and again, children seldom make up stories about sexual abuse. Children who have not been abused do not have that explicit knowledge of sexual acts or reactions. They also do not know the common emotional reactions that are consistently described in professional assessments. Children who report abuse, then later recant or "take it back" often do so because of fears about upsetting their parents or causing trouble. Some are afraid that they will not be believed or have been threatened with physical abuse or abandonment by the perpetrator.

Myth

Good parents can always protect their children with education.

Reality

The truth is even the most attentive and well-meaning parents may not be able to protect their child against a perpetrator. You certainly can provide a more protective environment by assessing environments, knowing people who associate with your children and educating your child. Perpetrators are excellent manipulators, and may also have manipulated the parents into believing their child is safe with them.

Talking to your children about the difference between good touch and bad touch is important. Also tell your children that the rule applies to everyone, even family members, teachers or people who are your friends. Teach them that it is okay to remove themselves from uncomfortable situations and how to reach you as soon as possible to tell you or another adult about any occurrences.

Myth

The majority of children are abused by strangers.

Reality

Most children are abused by people the child or parent knows and trusts. They are most vulnerable to these people. Of course, parents need to continue to provide educational warnings regarding strangers, too. They need to know how grown-ups can manipulate children, and the difference between what is OK and what is not, and about acceptable touch and non-acceptable touch.

Myth

Sexual abuse that occurs before a child can talk, or at a very early age, is forgotten and does not cause any harm.

Reality

Sometimes it is even harder for those who have had early abuse to work through the disturbing after effects because they have no concrete memories to work from. However, brain development can nonetheless be affected by abusive experience. The way a child's brain forms in the first three years is influenced by early experience and lays the foundation for adult life. It will affect how the child thinks, learns and sees the world as an adult.

Abuse in childhood has been linked to depression, mental health problems, early parenthood, family violence, aggressive behaviour, addiction to drugs, criminal offending and suicide in adulthood.

Myth

It's not sexual abuse unless intercourse is involved. There is really no harm in fondling, touching, rubbing, French kissing, mouth kissing, lewd talk, pornography exposure or voyeurism.

Reality

Wrong! All of the above constitute sexual abuse and can have extremely harmful effects on a child.

Myth

It's not sexual abuse when a 24-year-old man has sex with a "willing" 14-year-old.

Reality

Sexual abuse is about a power differentiation. An adult has more power than a 14-year-old. He or she knows there is much developmental difference between a teen and adult. However, the child may believe s/he is a willing participant because of the "dance of the perpetrator." This perpetrator often uses seduction, the allure of romance to a child just entering romantic relationships, and act as a "confidant" to a teenager who often turns to friends or others as s/he begins to become individuals. Why would a 24-year-old want to have a relationship with a young teenager? Who really has the power? Discuss your concerns with your child

and consider contacting authorities if this person is an adult who is preying upon teens.

Myth

Sometimes children are seductive. They have the power to stop the “sexual advances at any time, but they like it.”

Reality

Often children who have been sexually abused act seductively. Even if an adult is exposed to this behaviour, it is the adult's responsibility to say no, not the child's. They have learned attention and love equals this type of behaviour – but usually they don't understand what it means. Many times perpetrators teach the child to act this way, and fool the child into thinking it is all their idea or responsibility. The adult is always responsible, yet adult survivors often struggle with a feeling that they are responsible because they did not stop it at the time.

Myth

Children can stop abuse by just saying no or telling another adult

Reality

We would like to believe that, but it's often not true. Perpetrators frequently don't stop when a child says no – remember there is a power difference. They often pick a child who appears more vulnerable overall. This child is less likely to be assertive and more easily deceived. Often the abuse escalates over a period of time. The perpetrator tricks the child. The perpetrator also may threaten the child with physical harm, family abandonment, abuse of a sibling or belief that they are bad and s/he would not be touching them unless they had not asked for it. Teach children to say no and **keep telling until an adult listens and does something to protect them**. Don't be angry with a child who does not tell you. Something within the child's environment or manipulation by the perpetrator has stopped that from occurring.

Myth

Incest occurs because a man's wife is not satisfying him sexually.

Reality

Incest occurs because someone has a strong desire to have power over someone else; does not control or get help for unhealthy desires; a person thinks only of their self and negates any consequences to others; is willing to manipulate to get what s/he wants; is sneaky. It is not caused by the non-perpetrating spouse. The perpetrator may or may not be having sexual relations with an adult partner.

Myth

A sexual abuse survivor is likely to abuse his/her own children

Reality

This is not true! The majority of those who are sexually abused never sexually abuse their children. While perpetrators may have been sexually abused, they often also have grown up with neglect or violence. Their acts are a choice, not a genetic flaw. It is sad that some survivors choose not to have children because of that fear. It is important for you as a parent to get professional help to address the unresolved issues related to any abuse in your past, because these can impact your child as well. You may not be aware of the impact of the abuse on you as an adult and parent.

Myth

If the child becomes sexually aroused, or does not complain during the sexual abuse, then it does no harm and could not be considered sexual abuse.

Reality

The body reacts to physical sexual stimulation. This also can occur during sexual abuse. That is not under the child's control. The child may even enjoy these physical responses. Most children do not have the emotional capability of understanding what is happening. In many cases, the events leading up to the abuse may be the child's only moments of closeness.

Myth

You can spot an abuser by how he or she looks. They may look bizarre or mean.

Reality

It's true many sexual abuse survivors often get a negative feeling around perpetrators. If you get that feeling, honour it and take extra precautions until you can assess the situation further. That person may not be a sexual abuser, but your radar may be picking up things that are telling you to exercise caution. Unfortunately, there is no tell-tale mark of abusers. They come from all professions and have a vast array of different appearances. They can be parents, siblings, relatives, teachers, religious or scout leaders, doctors, neighbours, therapists and friends. That's why it's important that children and teens know that it's not just strangers that abuse children. They can be people they love and care for.

Myth

Abuse would not have occurred if someone had not been drinking or using drugs. Therefore, that person is not really responsible.

Reality

Using alcohol or drugs does not cause abuse, it reduces inhibitions. It is no excuse! The person who perpetrated the abuse is always responsible for their actions. Don't assume just because someone stops using that the abuse will stop.