

# Believe Me

## Children And Child Abuse



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### Learning Seed Catalog and ISBN Numbers

DVD LW7106-02-DVD ISBN 1-55740-472-0

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### Table of Contents

#### The Program

Summary .....	1
The Problem - Abuse.....	2
It's Okay Not to Keep Some Secrets.....	3
Important Messages for Young People.....	4
What is Child Sexual Abuse?.....	5
Impact of Sexual Abuse on Children .....	6
Some Additional Issues for Specific Groups.....	7
Why it's Difficult for Children to Tell.....	8
Supporting Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused .....	9

#### Interactive Elements

Questions For Discussion .....	10
Multiple Choice Worksheet.....	11
Multiple Choice Worksheet Answer Key .....	12

#### Additional Information

For More Information.....	13
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# Summary

Child sexual abuse is a widespread problem. Although awareness is increasing, there is still a reluctance to talk openly with children about the issue. It remains a hidden problem that young people find hard to talk about. However, talking is the most powerful thing children can do to protect themselves. Children cannot stop sexual abuse without help, and to get help they need to tell someone about it.

This video aims to provide a starting point for discussion about the issues involved with abuse. Young people who have no direct experience of sexual abuse will benefit from thinking about what behavior towards them is inappropriate, which secrets are better not kept, and what support systems are available to them if they are needed. Young people who have experienced sexual abuse will see the subject being openly discussed with their peer group and a supportive adult. The video will acknowledge their experiences, and help them to realize that they are not alone, that they are right to tell, and that abuse is never their fault. They will be able to pick up the information they need without being identified or singled out for special treatment.

Adults who work with young people will find it useful to consider the problem from a child's point of view, becoming aware of the particular difficulties faced by children experiencing sexual abuse. This will help them consider how best to support the young people they work with.

## Key points:

- Child abuse, including sexual abuse, is a much more widespread problem than most of us realize.
- Secrecy is the best tool an abuser has to enable the abuse to continue—children suffering abuse need to know that they can and should talk with someone about what is happening to them.
- Many children feel that they are to blame for their abuse—they need to be told (often many times) that they abuse they suffered is in no way their fault.
- There are many forms of sexual abuse—not all of which are physical—it is important to understand all the potential forms of child abuse.
- Abused children often show physical or psychological changes that may not seem connected—changes in behavior or physical health should not be ignored.
- When a child does seek help, they need a lot of support from any who can offer it—assistance should be provided for as long as the child needs it.

# The Problem - Abuse

## Who Experiences It?

Sexual abuse often goes unreported, so the exact numbers of young people who experience it are unknown. A study by the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit at the University of North London found that if sexual abuse was defined as 'any unwanted sexual event or interaction', then more than one woman in two and one man in four had such an experience before they were eighteen. [Kelly, Regan & Burton, 1991] Nationally in the U.S., '62% of females and 31% of males are sexually abused by age 18' [Child Abuse Statistics, <http://ezinearticles.com/?Child-Abuse-Statistics&id=133361>]

Sexual abuse can happen to any young person of any age. It happens to children from all races and religions, to disabled children, and to children from all class backgrounds. It is sometimes accompanied by violence and neglect, but can happen to a child in any situation.

## Who Perpetrates It?

The common view of sex abusers is that they are dangerous strangers. In fact, the abuser is more often someone known to the child, most commonly a man or older boy. In the U.S. '99% of sexual abuse survivors know their perpetrators - 80% are abused by family members, 19% are abuse by other trusted adults' [CCPA, 1992, <http://ezinearticles.com/?Child-Abuse-Statistics&id=133361>] The abuser could be someone who lives with the child; a father, stepfather or mother's boy friend, foster parent, older brother or stepbrother. It could be an adult in the community known to the child; a relation, neighbor, babysitter, friend of the family, teacher, care worker, or other trusted adult. It may be someone respected and looked up to by the local community such as a religious or community leader.

Some women do sexually abuse children, but this is not common. A small percentage of sexual abuse is carried out by women in collusion with men, or forced by men. Sometimes several adults will act together in a group to abuse a child or children. This could be a pedophile ring, or several people in a family group or friendship network. However, a British government study concluded that 'the vast majority of child sexual abusers are male and act alone'. [Home Office 1998]

## It's Okay Not to Keep Some Secrets

One of the primary ways abusers keep children in their control is to threaten or bribe them into secrecy. It is useful to get children to think about which secrets are good to keep, and which are not. Being asked by an adult to keep a secret that you feel uncomfortable about is a warning sign for young people.

It's important to tell someone if you are being abused. Children can't stop sexual abuse alone. They need to get help. Young people may have to tell more than one person before they are believed, or before action is taken. The person they tell may be reluctant to believe what they are saying. They may need to tell the same person more than once. Encourage abused children to be persistent. Help them think about who they could tell, if it ever happened to them. You are not responsible for the consequences of telling. When abuse is revealed, adults may get upset or angry. Unforeseen things may happen, for example there may be legal proceedings or the abuser may have to move out. Young people may feel they are to blame for whatever happens after they tell. They need to know that none of these events are their fault, and that the abuser is the one responsible for the abuse and its consequences, not them.

If you are abused, you can get help and recover. Young people need to be reassured that they can recover from the experience of being sexually abused. They will need help to do this, and it is available from a variety of sources, including: their friends and family, social workers, teachers, and groups especially for young people who have been abused. Later, they may need a bit of extra support at different stages in their life. Children who have been abused may need reassurance that they can go on to have completely normal adult relationships, and that they won't grow up to become abusers themselves.

# Important Messages for Young People

Sexual abuse happens to a lot of young people. 'In 2000, there were 261,000 victims of rape, attempted rape or sexual assault.' [2000 National Crime Victimization Survey, Bureau of Justice Statistics] It is useful to tell children that this is a common problem. The purpose of this is not to make them fearful, or to minimize the experience, but to help them feel less isolated and ashamed if it does happen (or has happened) to them. It is not your fault if you are sexually abused.

Young people often feel that they are to blame for the abuse. They may feel that they should have been able to stop it from happening or continuing. However, the abuser is always responsible for the abuse, never the child. People who sexually abuse are clever at getting children to trust them. They are usually bigger and stronger than the child, and have more power to get what they want.

Any sexual activity between a child and an adult is wrong. Sexual abuse can be confusing for children, especially if it happens within the context of an affectionate relationship. The child may love or respect the abuser, who may encourage them to think that the sexual activity is a sign of love and affection. It is important to be clear that sexual activity itself is not wrong, but that it should only take place when a person is old enough, and has sufficient knowledge and understanding to make a positive choice about being sexually active. No one deserves to be abused. Children who have been abused may start to think that they deserve this treatment, so it is useful to remind them that no one deserves to be abused for any reason. All young people are entitled to care and protection from the adults around them. Children have rights over their own bodies that adults should respect (for example, they shouldn't be forced to kiss or hug a relative or friend if they don't want to).

# What is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse is the exploitation of a child for the sexual gratification of an adult or older person. It happens when a young person is forced or enticed into taking part in sexual activities. This can involve a wide range of behavior including both physical contact and non-contact activities.

Non-contact sexual abuse can include flashing, obscene phone calls, text messages or e-mails. Phone chat lines and Internet chat rooms can also be sources of sexual abuse. Young people can be made to listen to sexual talk or watch sexual activities, look at pornography or pornographic videos, or pose for sexual photographs. Sexual abuse involving physical contact can include inappropriate kissing or hugging, being touched, or being made to touch the abuser in a sexual way. It can include masturbation, oral sex, and vaginal or anal penetration. Children may experience a single incident of sexual abuse, or it may happen repeatedly over a period of time. One person usually perpetrates sexual abuse, but sometimes it can involve a number of people—for example, several people in the same family group. Young people may experience abuse from different people at different points in their life.

Bribes, threats, coercion, bullying, or violence often accompanies sexual abuse. The abuser will often isolate the young person in an attempt to keep their behavior secret. Sometimes abuse is carried out in the context of an affectionate relationship; in which the abuser can behave seductively, bribing the child with presents and treats, or using emotional manipulation to get the child to comply with their wishes. There may be a long process of preparing the child for abuse, as the abuser slowly gains the child's confidence and breaks down their defenses. Children who have been abused may need trusted adults around them who can counter the distorted messages they have received about sex, and about their own self-worth.

The abuser could be someone who lives with the child—a father, stepfather or mother's boy friend, foster parent, older brother or stepbrother. It could be an adult in the community known to the child—a relation, neighbor, babysitter, friend of the family, teacher, care worker, or other trusted adult. It may be someone respected and looked up to by the local community such as a religious or community leader. Some women do sexually abuse children, but this is not common. A small percentage of sexual abuse is carried out by women in collusion with men, or forced by men. Sometimes several adults will act together in a group to abuse a child or children. This could be a pedophile ring, or several people in a family group or friendship network. However, a government study concluded that 'the vast majority of child sexual abusers are male and act alone'. [Home Office 1998]

# Impact of Sexual Abuse on Children

Sexual abuse affects children in different ways.

Common psychological effects are anger, rage, and sadness. Young people who have been abused often feel alone and isolated. The experience may leave them feeling ashamed and guilty. They may have low self esteem, and feel worthless and powerless. Children may become confused about what is appropriate behavior from an adult, especially if the abuse has started early and gone on for a long time. Some may become “switched off” and disconnected from other people.

Physical effects of sexual abuse can include; lack of concentration, sleep disturbances, and bedwetting. Young people who have been abused may self-harm. There may be medical problems such as urinary infections, genital pain, or sexually transmitted diseases. Sometimes sexual abuse results in pregnancy.

## Some Additional Issues for Specific Groups

Disabled children may be isolated, with less independent access to support systems. They may be dependent on the abuser as a caregiver. They may have a number of caregivers, which makes them more vulnerable to abuse. Sometimes the symptoms of sexual abuse are confused with the symptoms of their impairment, and it is therefore not recognized. They may have communication difficulties, or lack language skills. Their evidence is often discounted in court. Children from African-American or Asian communities may be reluctant to report sexual abuse because of racism. They may think that they will not be believed, or fear removal from their community. The experience of sexual abuse may reinforce the messages of racism, that they are different, bad, dirty, etc. They may have less access to support systems outside their community. If English is not their first language, they may have difficulty reporting the abuse.

Children living with domestic violence may be particularly scared of telling someone about the abuse. They may be kept isolated deliberately by the violent individual. Violence may be used as a way of keeping them quiet or distancing them from their mother or female caregiver. She may be forced by the violent man to collude with (or participate in) the abuse. Children in care may already be vulnerable due to past experience of neglect or mistreatment, and therefore be targeted by abusers. They may have already been abused. They are often isolated, and may have difficulty in trusting an adult to talk to.

# Why it's Difficult for Children to Tell

For all children who have been sexually abused, their trust in an adult or older person has been broken. If the abuser is someone they respect or care about, or someone who they look to for protection and support, they may find it difficult to trust another adult to help them.

Children have many real and imagined fears about telling someone:

- They are often afraid of what their abuser will do if they tell someone.  
*He said he'd kill my mum if I told. [Jenny]*
- They may fear that they won't be believed, that they will be laughed at, or they feel ashamed.  
*I wanted to talk to Sanjay about it, but I was worried about what he might think. [Joe]*
- They may fear the consequences of telling for themselves, the abuser, or their family.  
*I was worried that if I told...we'd all get split up. [Jenny]*
- Some children may feel that they have already 'told', and that they have been ignored.  
*I told my mum that I didn't want to go round there any more because he was a smelly old man. [Tanisha]*
- They may feel that the abuse is so obvious that there is no need to tell, and that people around them are accepting or ignoring what is going on.

It is common for children who have been abused to feel guilty. They may feel that they should have been able to stop the abuse happening or continuing, or that they should have told someone sooner. They often feel that they have invited the abuse in some way, and that they are to blame. The abuser may well have encouraged them to think these self-deprecating thoughts.

Young people may feel guilty for having any of these feelings:

- They may have enjoyed extra attention, treats, or money from the abuser.  
*He made me feel really special. [Tanisha]*
- They may have experienced feelings of sexual pleasure during the abuse.  
*I felt confused, because sometimes I did get turned on when he did these things to me. [Sam]*
- They may have mixed feelings about the abuser, especially if it was someone that they were close to.  
*It's hard not having a Dad around. I still miss those times when he'd be nice. [Jenny]*
- They may have experienced the abuse as a sign of affection, and formed a close relationship with the abuser.

# Supporting Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused

If you have concerns that a child may be experiencing sexual abuse seek advice from your local Department of Social Services or law enforcement agency.

If a young person tells you that they have been sexually abused:

- Listen to them calmly
- Allow them time to talk about what has happened
- Check whether they are safe from the abuser now

Tell them that:

- You believe them
- You are glad they told you
- It is not their fault
- It should not be happening to them
- You have to report the abuse, so you cannot keep it a secret
- You will try to get help for them (explain what you are going to do)

Young people may test out an adult before telling them the full story. They may tell a small part of the story to check out the response. They may talk about a 'friend' to whom something has happened. Children sometimes tell, and then retract their story. They may feel guilty for naming the perpetrator, or scared by the consequences of telling.

You have a responsibility to report the abuse:

- To stop the abuse from continuing
- To provide the child with support
- To protect any other children the abuser may have contact with
- To ensure an appropriate response from the criminal justice system

It helps children to recover from the experience of sexual abuse if:

- Their story is believed
- They have a protective parent or caregiver
- All their mixed feelings about the abuse/the abuser are validated
- Support is available if they need to access it
- Trusted adults around them can counter the distorted messages they have received about sex, and about their own self-worth.

# Questions For Discussion

1. Child abuse, including sexual abuse, occurs more often than we think. Do you know anyone who has been abused? Was that person able to seek help? Who did they go to for help?
2. Consider the portion of Jenny's script below. What other forms of abuse are apparent in Jenny's family? Was Jenny the only family member being abused at this time? Discuss how the earlier forms of abuse seen by Jenny may have made her less likely to tell someone when her dad started sexually abusing her...what could her mom have done earlier on?

*You never knew what mood my Dad would be in when he came home. Sometimes he could be really nice. But another day he'd be throwing things and shouting.*

*Sometimes at night we could hear him and my mum rowing. He used to hit her. My Mum got him to leave a couple of times but he always came back.*

*He started coming into my room at night when Mum was out. He'd say he was lonely and ask for a cuddle. He was my Dad and I thought it showed he loved me. But he started touching my private parts and doing things to me I didn't like, and which hurt.*

3. Imagine a child has just confided in you—her grandfather has sexually abused her for the past year...do you know what to do? Discuss what should/can be done from the moment this child confided in you. Could there be any difficulties while trying to seek justice? Place each of yourselves in different roles—one person could be the disbelieving mother, another law enforcement, a school counselor, social worker, etc. Imagine how these different individuals handle such a situation as you act out your role.
4. Now imagine the child who has confided in you is mentally handicapped. You feel what she's telling you is true...but how might the scenario for seeking justice change?

# Believe Me

## Multiple Choice Worksheet

Circle the best available answer for each of the following:

- 1) When Ruth told her dad that she didn't like Gary, her dad told her:
  - a) to be quiet
  - b) that she was being 'silly'
  - c) that Gary was just being 'friendly'
  - d) both b & c
- 2) Gary finally left Ruth alone when she told him that if he didn't, she would:
  - a) tell her dad
  - b) tell her teacher
  - c) tell her mom
  - d) go to the police
- 3) Joe's friend is:
  - a) Ruth
  - b) Sanjay
  - c) Moira
  - d) Punjabi
- 4) Concerned that Dave was acting inappropriately, Joe talked to his mom first, and then talked to:
  - a) his dad
  - b) his friend's mom
  - c) his teacher
  - d) his friend's dad
- 5) Only strangers sexually abuse children.
  - a) true
  - b) false
- 6) As a result of his sexual abuse, Sam was:
  - a) picking fights at school
  - b) caught running away from home
  - c) losing sleep
  - d) both a & c
- 7) Tanisha was being sexually abused by:
  - a) her granddad
  - b) Mr. Wilson
  - c) her dad
  - d) Mr. Fitzgerald
- 8) When Tanisha tried to tell her mom the first time about her sexual abuse, her mom said:
  - a) she believed Tanisha
  - b) to go to bed
  - c) that it was okay
  - d) that Tanisha was being rude
- 9) Jenny finally told her mom about her dad's abuse when:
  - a) her dad went to jail
  - b) she thought her dad was abusing her sister
  - c) her dad moved out
  - d) her mom asked her
- 10) When Jenny's mom found out about Jenny's abuse, she contacted:
  - a) the police
  - b) her parents
  - c) Childline
  - d) her pastor

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## Multiple Choice Worksheet *Answer Key*

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  - b) her parents
  - c) Childline
  - d) her pastor

## For More Information...

1. Child Molestation Research and Prevention Institute  
<http://childmolestationprevention.org/>
2. Child Advocates  
<http://www.childadvocates.org/>
3. Child Help – Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse  
<http://www.childhelp.org/>
4. Safe Child Program – Child Abuse  
<http://www.safechild.org/abuse.htm>
5. Prevent Child Abuse America  
<http://www.preventchildabuse.org/index.shtml>
6. Love Our Children USA  
<http://loveourchildrenusa.org/donate.php>
7. The Child Abuse Hotline.com  
<http://www.thechildabusehotline.com/>
8. Stand Up for Kids  
<http://www.standupforkids.org/>
9. Kidpower...International – Stop Child Abuse  
<http://www.kidpower.org/School-age.html>
10. National Sexual Assault Hotline - RAINN  
<http://www.rainn.org>
11. Healthline – Child Abuse  
<http://www.healthline.com>
12. National Council on Child Abuse and Family Violence  
<http://www.nccafv.org/>
13. The National Children’s Advocacy Center  
<http://www.nationalcac.org/>