

# Information for Childhood Survivors

## CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IS A FORM OF SEXUAL ASSAULT AND IS A CRIME

The central features of child sexual assault are:

- The abuse of children's natural instinct for trust and affection.
- The violation of children's personal boundaries and denying their right to feel safe and valued.
- Perpetrators using secrecy, power, trickery, force and affection to manipulate children.
- Children having an adult's sexual knowledge and behaviour imposed upon them, denying them the opportunity to develop their sexuality at a natural pace.

### Child sexual assault can happen to anyone

It is estimated that 38% of girls and 9% of boys will experience some form of sexual assault in their childhood.

People who perpetrate child sexual assault are usually people that the child knows. The perpetrator is most often a male.

Perpetrators take great care to keep their behaviour secret and to make children feel responsible for the assaults. This can often make it very difficult for children to feel able to tell someone about what is happening to them.

### Was I sexually assaulted as a child?

Sometimes people wonder if what happened to them was child sexual assault. It can include a child's body being touched in a sexual way or the child being made to touch an adult in a sexual way. It also includes other behaviors such as watching the child in order to be sexually aroused, making the child watch sexual acts or an adult behaving in a sexual way towards the child. Child sexual assault can be a single incident or occur over a longer period of time. It may involve one or more offenders.

Sexual assault of a child can have an impact on their physical, psychological and social development. However, the range and intensity of the effects of child sexual assault are different for everyone.

## SOME OF THE EFFECTS OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ASSAULT

### Emotions about the assault

Confusion, fear, shame, anger, powerlessness, numbness, grief, loneliness and extra alertness are all common reactions to sexual assault.

As children get older they may develop different ways to cope in order to dull the painful emotions and memories associated with the sexual assault.

### Decreased feelings of self worth

Sexual assault teaches children that they are not important and that their feelings do not matter. Often children and adult survivors carry shame about the assaults. As adults they may believe that they have no rights and the abuse may have taught them to believe that they do not deserve to be treated with respect.

### Problems in relationships

Sexual assault betrays a child's trust and denies them the opportunity to be loved unconditionally. Some survivors may find it very difficult to trust people, often fearing further betrayal. The perpetrator may be a family member and this can make any contact with their family of origin very distressing.

### Sexuality difficulties

Adult survivors may actively avoid sex or particular sexual acts that evoke memories of the assault/s. Alternatively, the assault may cause them to seek sex to meet their emotional needs, as they may believe that their only value is sexual.

### **Effects on the body**

Child sexual assault can hurt a child physically. Adult survivors sometimes experience physical sensations or pain that is linked to the childhood trauma.

### **IF YOU ARE A SURVIVOR OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ASSAULT**

Remember that you are a courageous and strong person who has survived child sexual assault. There is support and help available for survivors of childhood sexual assault.

Some things you can do:

- Talk to someone who you know and trust. Let them know what support you might need at this time.
- Express your feelings in a journal, through artwork or any other way that feels safe.
- Use a telephone counselling or support service if you need someone to talk to, especially at times of crisis.
- Read information on child sexual assault. This is available from sexual assault services, some government agencies, or your local library.
- Try to avoid unwanted sexual relationships or sexual behaviour with which you feel uncomfortable, as this may cause you to feel retraumatised.
- Make a list of safe things to do to help yourself through the difficult times.
- Consider counselling with a supportive and experienced counsellor. Many welfare services have information about counsellors. There may be a sexual assault counselling service in your area. Sometimes people try a couple of counsellors before they find someone who they feel comfortable with.
- If it would be useful for you, seek out information and options through the health, police and legal systems.