



## About Child Sexual Assault: information for parents, carers and family members

This fact sheet provides information for parents, carers and family members of a child who has been sexually abused. It covers the effects of child sexual abuse; answers some frequently asked questions; and provides guidance about how to respond to a disclosure of sexual abuse.

### What is Child Sexual Assault?

All sexual touching between an adult and a child is sexual assault. Sexual touching between children can also be sexual assault if there is a significant age difference, or if the children are very different in terms of physical or cognitive development (for more information about the legalities of consent, see the Legal Aid Commission of Tasmania's *Age of consent for sex fact sheet*, available on their website or by contacting them).

Child sexual assault includes:

- Sexual touching, fondling or kissing.
- Being forced to look at pornography or pose for pictures/videos.
- Perform sexual acts, participate in masturbation, or stimulate another person.
- Rape or attempted rape, including penetration of the anus, vagina or mouth with a penis, fingers, tongue or an object.
- Exposure ('flashing') of genitals, or making a child expose their body.

Child sexual assault does not have to involve penetration, force, pain, or even touching. If an adult engages in any sexual behaviour (looking, showing, or touching) with a child it is sexual assault.

The abuser may use manipulative methods of coercion

such as grooming, play, deception or threats.

The abuser may be a parent, sibling or other family member, friend, trusted adult, or a stranger.

### What are some of the effects that my child might experience from sexual assault?

Children who have been sexually assaulted might display a range of emotional and behavioural reactions, including:

- Nightmares or sleeping difficulties
- Wetting or soiling the bed
- Withdrawn behaviour
- Anger outbursts or aggression
- Anxiety
- Loss of appetite
- Depression
- Fear of certain people or places
- Sexual knowledge, language, or behaviours that are inappropriate for their age, or are even abusive towards other children
- 'Phantom' or persistent pains
- Clinginess
- Spacing out' or appearing to be in a trance

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It is important to remember that children who have been sexually assaulted may show some of these emotional and behavioural reactions, or they may show no outward reaction at all.

### **What are some of the effects that my family might experience?**

When a child is sexually assaulted it can affect the whole family. After a child has been sexually assaulted, it is common for parents to become very protective of all their children. This is a completely normal reaction. It is important to find a balance between reasonable concern and being overprotective.

Other siblings may also be feeling worried and confused about what is happening. You might need to talk to them about what has happened, even though this can be very confronting to do.

After the sexual assault of a child, there may be some tension and strain on the relationship between parents. It is likely to be a confusing time, which can affect the parent's communication, sexual relationship and level of intimacy. These strains are normal. Counselling and support can be a big help.

### **What are some of the effects that I might experience as a parent or carer?**

After hearing that your child has experienced sexual assault, it is likely that you will feel a range of emotions, including:

- Shock and confusion – you might feel that you can't understand what has happened and you don't know how to make sense of it.
- Disbelief and numbness.
- Responsibility and guilt – it is normal to feel like you have failed to keep your child safe. You may also feel guilty that you didn't know what was happening to your child.
- Betrayal – particularly if the abuser is/was a friend, family member or someone you knew.
- Fear and distrust - you might worry that this could happen again to any of your children, and you might feel like you can't trust people because of what has happened.
- Anger at the abuser.
- Anger at yourself for not knowing, or not being able to stop the abuse.
- Worry about how this will affect your child and your family.
- Anger or disappointment at your child not telling you.
- Worry about what other people will think.
- Disgust – you might feel that what has happened is absolutely disgusting.

Feeling any or all of these emotions is completely normal. You may want to know exactly what happened, or you may not want to hear about it at all. Child sexual abuse can provoke many different reactions and feelings.

### **Common questions: Why didn't I notice? Why didn't I know about it?**

These are some of the questions that may go round and round in your mind after you find out about the abuse. You might have noticed that things were not quite right at home or that your child had been acting a little differently - or you might not have noticed anything at all, or found it hard to put words to what you felt.

Some people talk about having a 'gut feeling' that something was wrong. At the time they usually found a reasonable explanation for what was happening. Looking back, it might be easy to see what was really going on but sexual abuse is not something that parents or carers think will happen to their child.

### **It's not your fault that you were not aware of it sooner, and it's not your fault that it happened.**

### **Common questions: Why did the abuser do it?**

Usually people who sexually abuse children will try to shift the blame away from themselves, or use excuses like:

- 'I wasn't receiving sexual satisfaction from my partner';
- 'No-one tried to stop me'; or
- "I couldn't control myself".

However, many people who sexually abuse children have normal sexual relationships with their partners or other adults. The reason people sexually abuse children is connected to their need to feel powerful and in control. It is not about sex.

### **The offending adult is in control of their behaviour and can choose not to abuse.**

### **Common questions: Wasn't I responsible for it happening, too?**

You are not responsible for your child being abused, even if you were:

- trusting of the perpetrator;
- sick, away or working long hours;
- unhappy, frightened of the perpetrator or preoccupied at the time; or
- no longer interested in your partner sexually (if the abuser was your partner).

### **The only person responsible for the sexual abuse is the abuser.**

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Most abusers take great care to carry out the abuse in secret. Often they arrange the situation so that no-one else will be present and no-one will find out what is happening. They often threaten to harm the child or others to stop them from telling.

### What can I do if my child discloses sexual assault?

It is devastating to find out that your child has been sexually assaulted. It can be hard to know what to say to your child, or how to help them.

It is also important to remember that this is likely to be a difficult time for you, your child and your family. It may be difficult to talk to your child about sexual assault, but talking about it will not make it worse for them.

Here are some ways that you can support your child:

- Tell them that you believe them.
- Reassure them in a loving and calm way.
- Make sure that your child knows that you do not blame them.
- Tell them that you will do all you can to keep them safe from now on.
- Let them know that you still love them.
- Say that you are glad that they told you what has happened.
- Give your child time to talk to you when they are ready, and be ready to talk at their pace.
- Make some time to spend with your child so you can talk privately. Allow your child to talk about the confusion they may be feeling.
- Be open and clear with them.
- Provide appropriate, easy-to-understand information about any court, medical or legal action that is taking place.
- Try to understand as much as you can about the effects of child sexual assault so that you can best support yourself, your child and your family.
- Seek professional support for your child, for yourself and for any other family members (like siblings) who may need it.

**Remember, even though child sexual assault can have severe impacts, children are generally very resilient.**

With the combination of effective counselling and support and love from their parents or carers, children can and do recover from these experiences with time.

In developing this fact sheet, SASS has accessed the following resources:

- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2009). *Caring for Kids: What Parents Need to Know about Sexual Abuse*. Funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: US Department of Health and Human Services.
- Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2013). *Parenting a Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents*. Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Washington, DC.
- Department of Health and Human Services. (2017). *You and Your Child: for parents of children who have been sexually abused*. State of Victoria, Melbourne.

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### Sexual Assault Support Service

Ground Floor, 31-33 Tower Road, New Town, 7008

03 6231 0044 (9am–5pm, Mon–Fri)

admin@sass.org.au | www.sass.org.au

24 hour sexual assault response and

counselling service: **1800 MYSUPPORT**

**1800 697 877**

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SASS holds Quality Improvement Council (QIC) accreditation.