



## Child Sexual Assault

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### 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. Sexual assault behaviours may include:

- Unwanted touching, fondling or kissing
- Being forced to look at pornography, pose for pictures, 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

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 of sexual assault?

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

- Nightmares
- 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- Withdrawn behaviour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 the child's age
- 'Phantom' or persistent pains
- Clinginess
- 'Spacing out' or appearing to be in a trance

## Child Sexual Assault (continued)

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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 reactions at all.

### *What you can do if your child discloses that they have been sexually assaulted?*

It is upsetting 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. 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
- 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, and allow your child to talk about the confusion they may be feeling
- Be open and clear with your child
- 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 and your child

### *Possible impacts on the family*

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 of their children. This is a completely normal reaction. It is important to find a balance between reasonable concern and overprotectiveness.

Other siblings may also be feeling worried and confused about what is happening. A family may need to talk about what has happened with the other children, which can be very confronting for the parents.

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 sexual relationship and level of intimacy. These strains are normal. Counselling and support can be a big help.

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

- Grief – it is very common to feel a sense of loss and grief. You may grieve for your child's loss of a sense of safety, trust and innocence
- Responsibility and guilt – it is normal to feel like you are the one responsible for the assault itself. You may feel that you are responsible for knowing what is happening to your child before they tell you
- Confusion and shock – you cannot understand what has happened and you do not know how to make sense of it
- Fear – you may be fearing that this could happen again to any of your children
- Distrust – you may feel like you cannot trust particular people because of what has happened
- Disgust – you may feel that what has happened is absolutely disgusting

# Child Sexual Assault (continued)

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Feeling any of these emotions is completely normal for the parents, friends and siblings of children who have experienced sexual assault.

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.

*Many children are quite resilient.*

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

## References:

- 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*. Child Welfare and Information Gateway: Washington DC.
- Department of Human Services Melbourne, Victoria. (2013). *You and Your Child*. State Government Victoria: Melbourne.

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## Sexual Assault Support Service

Ingomar House, 34 Patrick Street, Hobart

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24 hour sexual assault response and

counselling service: **1800 MYSUPPORT**

1800 697 877

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SASS holds Quality Improvement Council (QIC) accreditation.