

# Caring for Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused

## FosterParentCollege.com® A Viewer Guide

### Introduction to the Course

This class will explore what sexual abuse is, how it impacts the child, and how foster parents can help in the healing process. Children who have been sexually abused have had experiences way beyond their years. Parenting them requires special understanding since how a child reacts to the abuse may vary widely: some suffer in silence; some deny the trauma; while others act out sexually. This course will look at the emotional problems and behavioral issues stemming from the abuse.

Richard Delaney, PhD, psychologist, author, and foster care consultant, and Betsy Keefer Smalley, LSW, Director of Foster Care and Adoption Training, Institute for Human Services (IHS), Columbus, Ohio, share their many years of expertise in the areas of foster care and social work.

At the end of this course, you will be able to:

1. State the definition and types of child sexual abuse.
2. Describe the dynamics of child sexual abuse.
3. Know different sexual behaviors that can constitute child sexual abuse.
4. Understand the characteristics of children who have been sexually abused.
5. Understand the complexity of issues surrounding recovery from sexual abuse and the challenges caregivers face.

This companion guide provides the content of the course.



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PhD*



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## Definition and Types of Child Abuse

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Child sexual abuse, defined in both state and federal law, is an umbrella term for several types of inappropriate behaviors by perpetrators, including:

- Persuading, bribing, or forcing a child to act sexually
- Video recording of child sexual behavior
- Rape or statutory rape
- Incest
- Molesting (forced touching)
- Prostituting the child

Children who were victimized actually are at very low risk to commit future sex offenses, especially if provided with appropriate treatment. Children with sexual behavior problems appear to respond well and quickly to treatment especially when interventions also involve parents/caregivers.

In this first interactive exercise, viewers are asked to determine if statements about child abuse are true or false. Statements are followed with the correct answer and an explanation.

### **Most children are abused by someone they know, not by a stranger.**

*This is TRUE. The abuser is often a member of the child's immediate or extended family or someone else close to the child or having access to the child. Children are also sometimes abused by other children or teens, including their siblings.*

### **Almost all sexually abused children are girls.**

*This is FALSE. Girls are at 2 to 3 times higher risk than boys. However, approximately 10 to 30% of all child sexual abuse victims are male.*

### **Most sexual offenders are male.**

*This is TRUE. A much higher number of offenders are male, but women also can sexually abuse children. Sexual abuse by a female is just as serious and can be just as devastating as sexual abuse by a male.*

### **Sexual behavior by children indicates that they have been sexually abused.**

*This is FALSE. Sexual behavior can be age appropriate and natural.*

### **The birth mother should have known that her children were being victimized by her boyfriend or husband.**

*This is FALSE. It's widely believed, by many people, that non-offending parents always know about sexual abuse. But research suggests that this is not so. Most non-offending parents are unaware of the sexual abuse because they are also being manipulated and lied to by the offender.*

**Sexually abused teenaged girls are more likely to become pregnant earlier in life.**

*This is TRUE. Although their overt sexualized behaviors may decrease with time, research indicates that sexually abused girls are at increased risk for earlier pregnancy.*

**Children are most vulnerable to sexual abuse when they are very young.**

*This is FALSE. With sexual abuse, the risk rises with age; 10% of victims are under the age of 3 years. Children 12 years and older account for about a third of the cases.*

**Children who have been sexually abused may show more sexualized behavior.**

*This could be either TRUE or FALSE. Sexualized behaviors have been linked to child sexual abuse. These findings are most clear in younger children, or in older children who were abused at younger ages. However, it's important to remember that sexual behavior problems are not always caused by child sexual abuse.*

**Most sexually abused children hate the abuser and want to move out of their home or neighborhood.**

*This is FALSE. In sexual abuse, as in other forms of abuse, being removed from one's family is very traumatic. Often the child wants to remain with the family; they just want the abuse to go away. Children often love the person who is sexually abusing them; they just don't like the abuse. This causes a lot of conflict for children. They can feel deeply ambivalent toward the perpetrator.*

**When sexually abused children enter foster care, their problems, hurt feelings, anger and confusion do not simply disappear.**

*This is TRUE. Children often continue to experience problems in care. Sometimes their problems get worse. This may happen because children don't understand the role they are supposed to play in the new family.*

## **Dynamics: Developing Insight Into Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused**

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Sexual abuse of a child may be a physical act, but it has long-term psychological effects. The specific effects depend on one or more of dynamics of the relationship between the abuser and the child. Some children are affected by one or more of the following dynamics. Others may be impacted by all four.

### **Sexualization**

The child was treated in a way that conveyed the idea that he or she is a sexual plaything for the abuser's sexual enjoyment.

- The child is left with sexual feelings, attitudes, and behaviors that have been shaped inappropriately. The child is super-sensitized to sex and is overly tuned into sexual matters.

## Betrayal

The child has been harmed or exploited by someone the child trusted and depended upon. The child also may feel betrayed by other adults who did not protect him or her.

- The child is left with the sense that he cannot trust or rely on others. The child will question the motives of others who show love and will be in a constant dilemma of being unable to trust those near to him.

## Powerlessness

During the abuse the child has been dominated by the abuser and forced to do things against his or her will. The child feels unable to make adults understand or believe what is happening.

- The child is left with low self-esteem and feels she has little or no control over her life. Even after the abuse ends, the child views herself as weak with little or no power to escape or stop what she does not want to do.

## Stigmatization

During the abuse the child's self-esteem is damaged by shame, wrongness, and guilt over the event. This is worsened by the abuser who directly or indirectly blames the victim for the activity.

- The child is left with feelings of disgrace and shame, and may have the perception that others see him as "damaged goods." The child feels unworthy of anything.

The next exercise is based on a case study. As the story unfolds, viewers are asked to identify the dynamics impacting a sexually abused child. Questions are followed by the correct selection and an explanation.

*Eight-year-old Emma was allowing boys to touch her sexually while on the playground. An evaluation determined that Emma had been victimized by her stepgrandfather, who lived with the family. When the parents defended the grandfather, Emma was removed from the home and placed in temporary foster care. Eventually the parents acknowledged the grandfather had abused the child and was forced out of the home. The foster family worked with the birth family to reunite Emma.*

*After several weeks in therapy and the safety of the foster home, Emma revealed that the stepgrandfather would give her presents for touching him.*

## What was Emma experiencing?

**Betrayal and Sexualization.** The grandfather is family and in a position of power and trust. He betrayed Emma. She was treated like a sexual object and was bribed by the grandfather. He shaped her behavior to sexually satisfy him.

*Emma was filled with shame and began refusing to go to school. She feared the other children would ask her why she was in foster care and would be able to tell she had been sexually abused.*

**Stigmatization.** Emma feels shame and probably views herself as “damaged goods.”

*In the foster home, Emma allowed an older foster boy (who was often mean to her and whom she didn't like) to touch her sexually.*

**Powerlessness.** Emma views herself as a victim and feels powerless.

*In the foster home Emma avoided the foster father, especially if they were alone together. She would not give the foster father eye contact, nor would she respond to him.*

**Betrayal.** Emma does not feel comfortable nor is she able to trust an adult male. She is unable to judge if someone is safe.

## Typical Sexual Behaviors

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Humans are sexual beings and sexual behavior in children is normal. While some typical behaviors (such as masturbating) might conflict with someone's personal, cultural, or religious teachings, it is important for foster parents to know which sexual behaviors fall within the range of normal for a typically developing child. The ability to distinguish the difference between a child's natural curiosity about his body and a sexually abused child's behavior will help parents know when to seek professional advice.

In the next interactive exercise viewers are asked to determine if a behavior is typical by indicating yes, no, or maybe to a description of that behavior. Statements are followed by the correct response and an explanation.

### **A 2-year-old runs naked around the house.**

*Yes, this is typical. It's natural for a 2-year-old to shed his clothes and run naked in the house or yard.*

### **A 4-year-old touches his own penis or her own vagina.**

*Yes, this is typical. It's natural at this age to explore the body and to feel pleasure. However, excessive or continued masturbation by a 4-year-old might be considered a sign that the child has been sexually abused.*

**An 11-year-old boy seeks out sexual content through magazines, the media, and the internet.**  
*Maybe this is typical. School-aged children are very curious about other people's bodies. They will be interested in seeing pictures of naked people, and it's impossible to say whether the behavior indicates a problem.*

**A 12-year-old girl is overly friendly with adult males who visit the family home and hugs and rubs against them.**  
*No, this is not typical. This is concerning and could suggest a history of sexual abuse.*

**A 14-year-old boy tries to undress his 8-year-old sister to see her naked.**  
*No, this is not typical because the boy is much older, larger, and more sophisticated, than the younger child who can be easily manipulated. Her ability to say no is quite limited.*

**A 13-year-old foster child masturbates discretely in the bathroom or bedroom.**  
*Yes, this is typical. Masturbation is a way for children to release sexual tension. The behavior becomes problematic when it is done at inappropriate times or in inappropriate places.*

## **Foster Parenting a Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused**

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In addition to an awareness of the issues and facts surrounding child sexual abuse, foster parents will also want to access the expertise of the members of the child welfare team. The following case study demonstrates how foster parents strengthened their skills and became more comfortable fostering children who have been sexually abused.

*Kinship parents to twins were asked to foster a child who had been sexually abused. Worried about the potential for false accusations, the foster parents sought extra training on how to make their home safe for everyone. Their in-depth training covered how to insure privacy and boundaries, supervision strategies, and safety and house rules. They joined a support group and met experienced foster parents who were able to share ideas and bolster the new parents' confidence.*

## **Mandated Reporting**

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Mandated reporters are required by law to report suspected abuse. Permissive reporters are allowed by law to make a report of suspected abuse to authorities. Many states require foster parents to report suspected abuse. Individuals who have frequent contact with children are mandated reporters. This includes:

- Social workers
- Teachers and other school personnel
- Physicians, dentists, hospital employees and other health care workers
- Mental health professionals

- Child care providers
- Medical examiners or coroners
- Law enforcement officers

A mandated reporter needs to report when he or she suspects or has reason to believe a child has been abused or neglected, or when the reporter has knowledge of, or actually observes a child being subjected to conditions that would reasonably result in harm to the child. This includes:

- A child's disclosure of abuse
- Physical marks such as burns or bruises
- Atypical sexual behavior

## Reports to CPS should include:

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- Who: The name(s) and age(s) of the child or children suspected of being victims of abuse and the name(s) of the alleged perpetrator(s).
- What: The type of abuse the alleged victim or victims experienced.
- Where: The location(s) where the alleged abuse occurred.
- When: Date(s) and/or time(s) the incident(s) of alleged abuse took place.
- Any disclosures: When and how the child told you.
- Any observations that led you to suspect child abuse.

Reports must be filed as soon as practical to do so; usually within 24 – 36 hours of learning of the abuse. Most states have laws that protect reporters from criminal and civil liability if they have reported in "good faith."

## Concerns about False Allegations

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While false allegations of abuse are infrequent, they do occur. Foster parents can take steps to protect themselves from false allegations:

- Keep a daily incident log
- Have pre-established and written protective house safety rules
- Ask the child's case worker about any prior history of sexual abuse
- Take a class in defensive parenting

## **Foster Parenting the Sexually Abused Child**

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Children are traumatized by sexual abuse and placement in a loving foster home does not make the difficult-to-manage emotional problems and behavioral issues go away. Children often deny the abuse, further complicating the healing process. Given the prevalence of sexual abuse, many foster parents themselves will have been abused as children. This can cause a caregiver to feel uncomfortable and focus on his or her own victimization. Examining their own thoughts and feelings will help foster parents provide the safe environment needed to help an abused child heal.

## **In Closing**

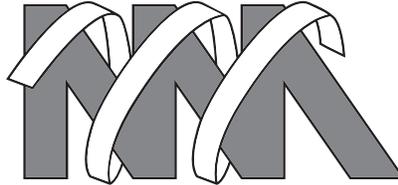
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The parent's first job is to keep children safe from harm. The process for reporting alleged abuse is the first step toward providing that safety. Structure and safety rules in the home also provide a sense of safety and security and extend the foster parents' ability to help children heal.

Viewers are reminded to access the printable material in the handout section.

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