

# Early Identification Is Crucial

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*Thus has the Lord of Hosts said “dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion to one another.*

—Zechariah 7:9

Child sexual abuse is a reality in our society and within our Church. While we may not be able to eliminate this reality from our society, or from our Church, as caring adults we have the ability to recognize questionable behaviors and to identify possible symptoms or behaviors displayed by children who *may* have been sexually abused. Awareness and education can be major steps in identifying potential abuse and being able to identify the short-term affects of sexual abuse. Such awareness and education can help in minimizing the long-term affects of sexual abuse, if not the reality of sexual abuse itself.



Sexual abuse may be considered as any sexually related behavior between two or more people where there is an imbalance of power. This can include adult-child, older child-younger child, or any situation where the other person is forced to participate. Sexual abuse is the offenders’ misuse or abuse of power and control. It may be accomplished through grooming processes such as force, deception, bribery, blackmail, or any other means that gives the offender an upper hand. The abuse behaviors may range from peeping, exposing genitals, fondling, oral/anal/vaginal sex, showing or taking pornographic pictures of a child, or any other sexual behavior.

The term “consensual” implies that the other person freely agrees to do something. Both people involved must be mentally competent (of equal intelligence and not under the influence of alcohol or drugs) to freely agree or give consent. **There is no such thing as a child or young person giving consent.** That means the older person cannot excuse his or her behavior by saying the child agreed to it.

The initial effects of childhood sexual abuse have demonstrated that children who have been sexually abused present with a host of initial psychological symptoms and behaviors. These consist of depression, guilt, anxiety, fear, learning difficulties, sexualized behavior, aggressiveness, and self-destructive behavior. It can also cause damaging spiritual effects when the offender is a priest or another religious leader. Sexual victimization may profoundly interfere with and alter the development of attitudes toward self, sexuality, and trusting relationships during the critical early years of development.

Most of the research focuses on the possible long-term psychological effects of childhood abuse by comparing adult survivors with non-abused controls. Reviews of the literature indicate that psychological problems in adulthood associated with childhood sexual abuse history include fear, anxiety, depression, anger, hostility, inappropriate sexual behavior, poor self esteem, tendencies toward substance abuse, and difficulty with close relationships.

Those with a reported childhood sexual abuse history also have high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder compared with non-childhood sexual abuse victims. In addition, adults with a reported history of childhood sexual abuse have more unexplained medical problems and use more medical services than non-abused individuals.

The effects of child sexual abuse are even more profound when children are victimized by fathers or stepfathers and when the victimization involves force and genital contact. Reactions of family members and others to the disclosure of the sexual abuse may also influence victims’ reactions and recovery.

Early identification of sexual abuse in victims appears to be crucial to the reduction of suffering in abused youth and to the establishment of support systems for assistance in pursuing appropriate psychological development and healthier adult functioning. As long as disclosure continues to be a problem for young victims, then fear, suffering, and psychological distress will, like the secret, remain with the victim.