



Sex? Or Sexual Abuse?

respect yourself—
know the difference

I was 17 years old the night of graduation. My best friend and I ditched the senior grad night to hang out with two older guys we knew. We showed up and I told the guy that I didn't want to have sex, which I told him because he took advantage of me before when I was drunk. But I figured that had been my fault since I was drunk. When I started drinking I can remember getting very dizzy, like I was going to pass out. The last thing I remember is my best friend laughing and taking a shot. The next morning I woke up naked in bed with one of the guys. I had no idea what happened. Every now and then this guy will call me, but I don't answer. I am not sure if what happened was my fault.

Amber, 18, sexual assault survivor*

When sex is used as a weapon, or a way of controlling someone, or to satisfy one person's sexual needs, it isn't love. It isn't even really sex—it's sexual abuse, and people who use sex to manipulate, control, or harm other people aren't boyfriends, or girlfriends, or lovers, they are *perpetrators*.

Knowing the difference between sex and sexual abuse isn't always easy. Perpetrators of sexual abuse often try to make their victims feel ashamed or responsible for the abuse, or to convince them that the abuse is a form of love. Some perpetrators will engage children in sexual activities in such a playful way that the young child might like the attention and might not understand that the perpetrator's behavior was sexually abusive. Following are some classic "red flags" of sexual abuse.

*Not her real name.

1. Using Physical Force

If a person physically forces you to engage in sexual acts, watch sexual material (such as dirty movies or pictures), won't let you leave, physically threatens you, or otherwise forces you against your will—it's sexual abuse.

Teens account for 51% of all reported sexual abuse.

Source: http://www.teenhelp.com/teen_abuse

2. Using Emotional or Psychological Force

If a person who is in a position of power or trust—like a teacher, older relative, or boss—makes you feel like you have to engage in sexual acts or watch sexual material with them—it's abuse.

My stepfather began touching himself and staring at me nearly every day. Every time, I just stayed still, clenched my teeth and waited until he was finished. I thought that if I ignored him he would eventually stop. I was wrong . . .

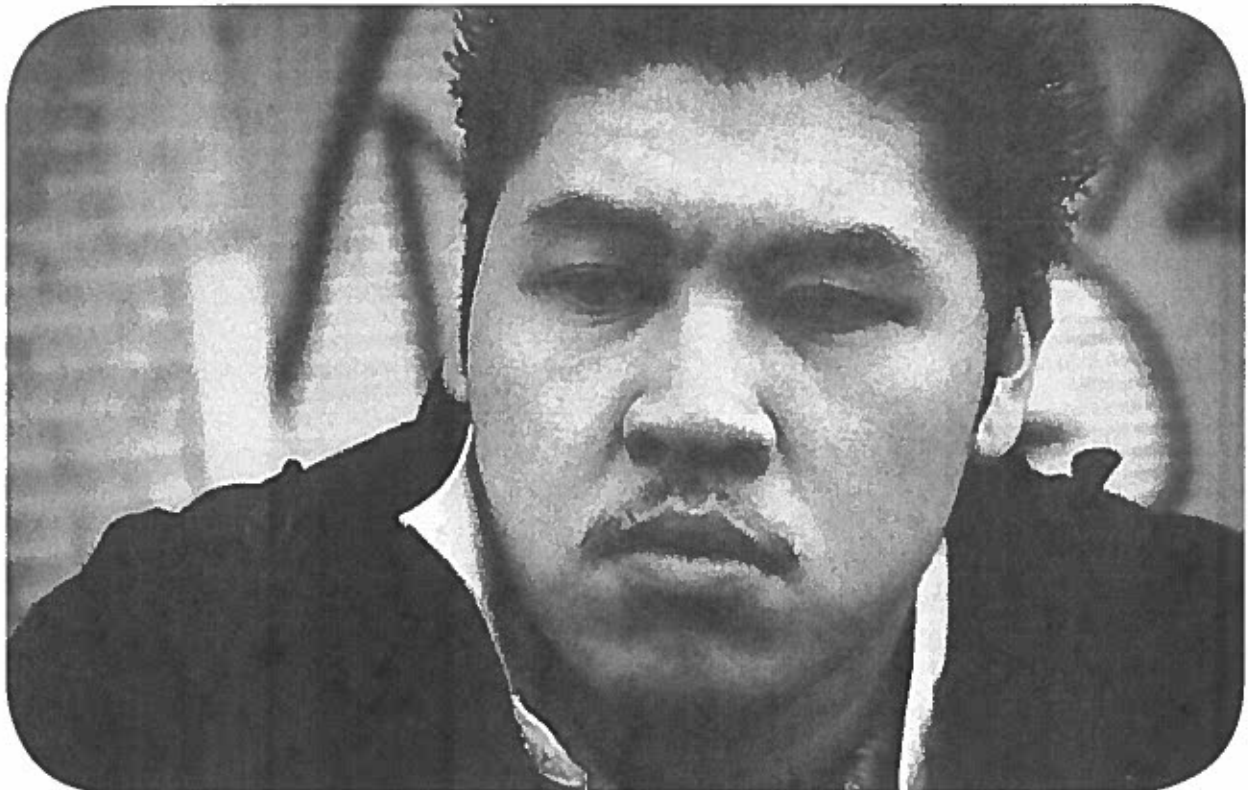
He would write me letters saying that I was the devil's child and that I seduced him. He left sticky-notes in front of the computer with phrases like "You're a whore" and, "You know you have fantasies about me."

Tabitha,* 17-year-old sexual abuse survivor

<http://www.youthcomm.org/NYC%20Features/April2009/NYC2009-04-22.html>

3. The Old Bait and Switch

If a person starts out doing things that seem innocent and playful (tickling, a friendly hug) and then starts touching you or making you touch them in unwanted sexual ways—it's abuse.



*Not her real name.

4. Secrecy

If a person engages in an unwanted sexual act with you and then pressures you to keep it a secret—or threatens you with harm if you tell—it's abuse.

5. Blaming the Victim

If a person forces you to engage in a sexual act and then says that it was your fault because you were drunk/high, “asked for it” by wearing certain clothes or looking a certain way, or were lying when you said you didn't want to—it's abuse.



Understanding Date Rape

Date rape (sometimes called acquaintance rape) is when somebody you know uses physical force, drugs or alcohol, or emotional pressure to make you engage in unwanted sexual activities.

There are steps you can take to lower your risk of date rape. For more info on staying safe—and on what to do if date rape occurs—check out the following resources from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network:

- Preventing Acquaintance Rape
http://nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/caring/preventingacquaintancerape.pdf
- What do I do now? A Survival Guide for Victims of Acquaintance Rape
http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/caring/acquaintancerapeguideforvictims.pdf

It's Never Your Fault

the truth about
sexual abuse

One night at a party I started making out with this guy I sort of knew from school. We were both pretty high, and when I tried to stop he wouldn't let me go ... I was too wasted to stop him, and before I knew it I was having unprotected sex with a guy I hardly knew. When it was over I panicked. . . I didn't know who to talk to because I figured everyone would say it was my fault for getting drunk and leading him on.

Karin*, date rape survivor

If you're like most teens, you already know someone who has been sexually abused. Studies show that one in four girls—and one in six guys—experience some form of sexual abuse before they turn 18. Many never tell anyone what happened. There are so many myths about sexual abuse that kids who've been abused may feel confused or even blame themselves for what happened.

Sexual abuse is any time someone in a position of power—physical, emotional, or psychological—engages another person to do something sexual that is age inappropriate, uncomfortable, or against their will. Sexual abuse usually includes some sort of touching, but it can also mean being inappropriately encouraged or forced to watch sexual acts, including pornography.

There are so many myths about sexual abuse that many kids who have been abused never tell anyone what happened.

*Not her real name.

This project was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The views, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.

When sexual abuse is committed by someone the victim knows, it may be called “date rape” or “acquaintance rape.” When it is committed by a family member, it may be called “incest.” A person who commits sexual abuse is called a “perpetrator.”

A perpetrator can be anyone: the coolest kid on the football team, your favorite teacher, even someone in your family. In fact, three out of four sexual assaults are committed by someone the victim knows.

If you—or someone you know—has been sexually abused, it’s important to know what’s true and what’s a myth.



Sexual Abuse Myths and Facts

When I was about 8, my friend’s dad used to make me touch my toes while he stood behind me and held my hips. I could feel his crotch grinding into me. He tried to make it seem like a game, but it made me feel bad inside. I hated it, but I never told anyone. After all, he was my friend’s dad. Carl, sexual abuse survivor*

MYTH: It wasn’t sexual abuse if you didn’t have intercourse.

FACT: If you didn’t agree to the sexual activity, it was sexual abuse. Even if there was no or very little physical contact, if you felt like you had no other choice (for example, if the person threatened to leave you by the side of the highway) it was sexual abuse.

MYTH: If you’re abused by somebody who’s the same sex as you, it means you’re gay.

FACT: Sexual abuse is a crime. It’s about power and control, not desire. The sex of the perpetrator doesn’t say anything about whether the victim is straight or gay.

MYTH: If you thought it was fun and you liked the attention, it wasn’t sexual abuse.

FACT: Perpetrators often engage children in inappropriate sexual interactions in a gradual and playful manner. As a result, children may enjoy the attention and bodily sensations they experience and may not object to the ongoing abusive activities. This is still sexual abuse and it is not the child’s fault no matter how he/she responds to the abuse.

MYTH: If you were high or drunk when it happened, it was your own fault.

FACT: Getting drunk or high doesn’t mean you deserve to be sexually abused. Even though it’s important to be aware of where you are and what you’re doing in order to keep safe, the perpetrator is *always* at fault.

Sexual abuse is always the perpetrator’s fault.

MYTH: If you aren’t physically hurt (hit, punched, pushed to the ground, etc.), it isn’t really abuse.

FACT: Emotional pressure (including threats) can be just as bad as physical force. If you were made to do something sexual that you didn’t want to do, it’s sexual abuse—no matter what kind of force the perpetrator used.

*Not his real name.

MYTH: If the perpetrator was drunk or high when it happened, it wasn't really his (or her) fault.

FACT: Lots of people drink or use drugs and never sexually abuse anyone. Being drunk or high is no excuse for abuse. Sexual abuse is always the perpetrator's responsibility.

MYTH: If you flirted or fooled around with the person beforehand, you were asking for it.

FACT: Even if you made it seem like you *might* be interested in sex, you always have the right to say no. If you didn't agree to doing something sexual at the time, it's sexual abuse.

MYTH: If you were sexually involved with the person in the past, it can't be sexual abuse.

FACT: It's *your* body. You have the right to say what happens and when. No matter what you've done before, no one has the right to force you into doing anything sexual.

MYTH: If you were sexually aroused when it happened, deep down you really wanted it.

FACT: It's normal for your body to respond to sexual stimulation; it's a response that can happen even during a rape. It has nothing to do with whether or not you agreed to be in the situation before it happened. If you didn't agree before it started, it was sexual abuse.

MYTH: Telling people will just lead to more trouble. No one will believe you anyway.

FACT: Letting others know about sexual abuse is the first step in healing. Most teens find that someone believes and supports them every step of the way. But this can't happen until you tell someone what happened.

MYTH: Once you've been sexually abused, you'll never be able to trust anyone or have a normal relationship.

FACT: Most teens who have experienced sexual abuse go on to have normal, healthy, happy relationships and sex lives. Talking about the abuse and getting support and treatment can help.

From the time I was a baby, my dad sexually abused me. At 14 I started locking myself in my room at night. One night I forgot to lock myself in. I woke up to find my father violating me. I jumped out of bed and ran to the bathroom ... I told myself that it was all just a terrible dream. I didn't want to believe that my dad would really do that to me so I blamed myself. I told myself that I was a horrible, sick, and disgusting person for having a dream like that about my own father.

Barbara Feaster, incest survivor

No matter what you've done before, no one has the right to force you into doing anything sexual.

It has been over 15 years since I aged out of foster care and I am now a loving and devoted mother ... I know firsthand that even children from tragic personal circumstances have enormous potential and can rise to the occasion to reach success in their lives.

Barbara Feaster, incest survivor

Where To Go For Help

If you or someone you know has experienced sexual abuse, you don't have to go through it alone. The Web sites and hotlines listed below can help you get the support you need to heal.

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN)

<http://www.rainn.org/>

In addition to an online hotline (<https://ohl.rainn.org/online/>), RAINN offers a National Sexual Assault telephone hotline (1-800-656-HOPE) that will automatically connect you to the nearest rape counseling agency or rape crisis center. RAINN also offers information on sexual assault, tips for what to do following an attack, information on how to help loved ones who have been raped, and a search page for finding local rape crisis centers.

911Rape

<http://www.911rape.org/home>

911Rape offers support for sexual assault victims as well as a safe, anonymous way to learn how to get help after a sexual assault.

National Center for Victims of Crime, Teen Action Partnership

<http://www.ncvc.org/tvp/main.aspx?dbID=DBTeenActionPartnership788>

This toll-free helpline—1-800-FYI-CALL (1-800-394-2255, 8AM to 8PM EST)—offers supportive counseling, practical information, and referrals to local sources of help.

After Silence

<http://www.aftersilence.org/index.php>

On this Web site, you will find a support group, message board, and chat room for survivors of rape, sexual assault, and sexual abuse.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

What Do I Do Now? A Survival Guide For Victims of Acquaintance Rape

http://nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/caring/acquaintancerapeguideforvictims.pdf

This survival guide was designed to help teens understand what acquaintance rape is, the steps they should take after it occurs, common reactions, and ideas for getting help.

Recommended Citation: National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2010). *It's never your fault: The truth about sexual abuse*. Los Angeles, CA, & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

Copyright: Copyright © 2010 National Center for Child Traumatic Stress on behalf of the Child Sexual Abuse Collaborative Group, National Child Traumatic Stress Network. This work was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which retains for itself and others acting on its behalf a nonexclusive, irrevocable worldwide license to reproduce, prepare derivative works, and distribute this work by or on behalf of the Government. All other rights are reserved by the copyright holder(s).

National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.

“But who should I tell?”

questions and answers
about seeking
help after
sexual abuse

My soul was crying out for me to tell . . . but the fear I had in my heart prevented me.

Anna, 15, sexual abuse survivor*

For kids like Anna, letting other people know that they have been sexually abused—a process called disclosure—can be almost as painful and scary as the abuse itself. So painful and scary, in fact, that many kids who are sexually abused never tell anyone what happened.

If you have been sexually abused, it is important that you let someone know what happened and get help. Disclosure may be scary, but it is also the first step in healing from the pain.

*Why should I tell anyone?
All I want to do is put this behind me.*

Sexual abuse lives on because of secrecy. People who commit sexual abuse (perpetrators) often blame, shame, or threaten their victims to make sure no one hears about what they have done to you. Disclosure is the first step to healing for you, and also the first step to making sure the person who hurt you doesn't get a chance to hurt anyone else.

*Not her real name.

Help on How to Tell

If you're not sure what to say—or who to say it to—check out the Just Tell-Kids Web site (<http://www.justtell.org/8-12/welcome.html>) for more info and advice.

... If anyone reading this is going through what I went through, please take my advice: No matter how bad or good the rapport is between you and your family members, do not wait until the abuse destroys you to tell someone. ... If one person doesn't believe you, tell someone else. Keep telling until someone listens. I know it's painful to tell, but what you're living with is far worse.

Anna,* 15,
sexual abuse survivor
[http://www.youthcomm.org/FCYU-Features/PartnerinCrime\(11.16.00\).htm](http://www.youthcomm.org/FCYU-Features/PartnerinCrime(11.16.00).htm)

Who should I tell?

Tell an adult that you trust and feel comfortable with. Sometimes that means a parent or other relative; sometimes it means a teacher, counselor, or even a friend's parent. The main thing is that you trust the person. If you're not sure who to tell, you can also call the **ChildHelp Hotline at 1-800-4-A-CHILD** (1-800-422-4453). The call is free, and the ChildHelp crisis counselors can help you find help in your area.

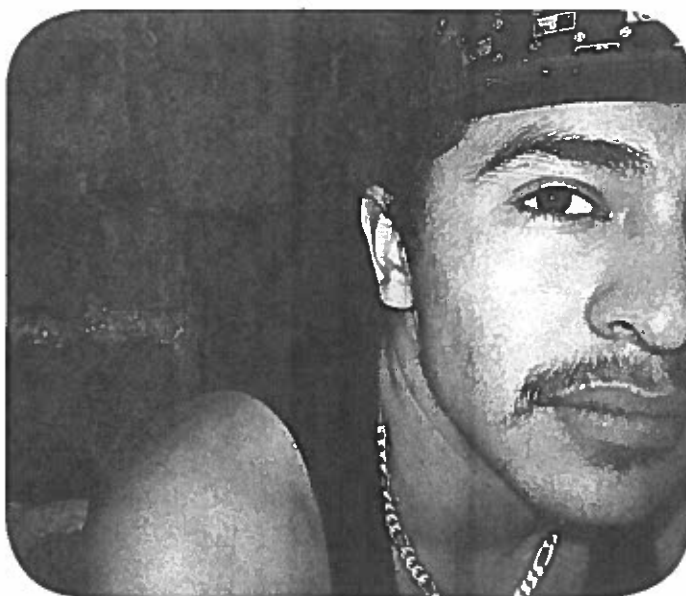
What if the person I tell doesn't believe me?

Tell someone else! Most kids find that the adults they tell do believe them and will help them. But when the perpetrator is a relative or family friend, some adults may not want to believe that a person they trusted could do such a terrible thing. If the first person you tell doesn't believe you or does nothing to help, keep telling people—your favorite teacher, your school counselor, the school nurse—or call the ChildHelp hotline (1-800-422-4453) until you get the support and help you need.

What will happen after I tell?

After you tell, you may have concerns about yourself and your body. Having a medical exam will be helpful to make sure you are healthy. In addition, to make sure everyone is safe and getting the help they need, you may need to talk to a caseworker, counselor, and/or the police. Counseling can be very helpful to young people as they go through this experience. If the perpetrator was someone you live with, there may be changes at home to make sure that you and other family members are safe from harm. Whatever happens, keep in mind that everything is being done to make sure that you are safe and that you get the help you need to heal.

Disclosure can bring up a lot of confusing feelings. You may feel good about no longer having such a big secret and safer because someone knows, but also angry about what happened and scared about how people will react. You may even feel worried about what's going to happen to the perpetrator. All of these reactions are normal. The important thing is to remember that you did the right thing and that the abuse was not your fault.



*Not her real name.

I told, and now it just seems like everything is worse than ever. Can't I just take it all back?

The days and weeks right after a person discloses sexual abuse can be kind of rough, particularly if the perpetrator was someone you knew well. Many perpetrators try to make their victims feel responsible for the abuse, or to believe that the abuse was love. But sexual abuse is NEVER your fault, and it is NEVER okay for an adult to express love by being sexual with a child (including teenagers). By disclosing the abuse, you've protected yourself and other kids who might have been abused. You may even have made it possible for the perpetrator to get help so he (or she) won't abuse again.

My family supported me and constantly reminded me that I had done the right thing by speaking out. And after I spoke out, my stepfather's sister and niece confessed that he had molested them as well. It made me feel proud to have been the one with the courage to speak out.

Tamika,* 17, sexual abuse survivor
<http://www.youthcomm.org/NYC%20Features/April2009/NYC-2009-04-22.html>

Sometimes family and friends may take a while to understand what happened and to fully accept that the perpetrator did such a terrible thing. This can be frustrating and scary, but most kids who disclose do have family members and friends who support them and want to help. Hang in there and rely on the people who believe in you and who you trust.

Where can I go to learn more and get help?

There are many organizations and Web sites that can help you with getting help and taking the step of disclosure. Here are just a few:

- **911Rape** (<http://www.911rape.org/home>) sponsored by the Rape Treatment Center at Santa Monica-UCLA Medical Center, this site offers support for info on how to get help after a sexual assault/abuse.
- **After Silence** (<http://www.aftersilence.org/index.php>) offers a support group, message board, and chat room for survivors of sexual abuse.
- At the **National Center for Victims of Crime, Teen Action Partnership** (<http://www.ncvc.org/tvp/main.aspx?dbID=DBTeenActionPartnership788>) you'll find a toll free helpline—1-800-FYI-CALL (1-800-394-2255, 8AM to 8PM EST)—where you can get counseling, practical information, and referrals to local sources of help.
- **The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN)** (<http://www.rainn.org>) offers general information on sexual abuse and a search page for finding local rape/sexual abuse crisis centers. RAINN also sponsors the toll-free National Sexual Assault Hotline (1.800.656.HOPE).

Lots of kids have gone through sexual abuse and have gained strength and greater confidence through the disclosure and recovery process. You can read some of their stories—in their own words—in these two excellent books:

- *Kids helping kids: Break the silence of sexual abuse.* (Linda Foltz, Pittsburgh, PA: Lighthouse Point Press, 2003.)
- *Laurie tells.* (Laurie Lowery, Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, Learner Publishing Group, 1995).

*Not her real name.