



## **Community beliefs and misconceptions about child sexual abuse**

### **Child sexual abuse is a crime**

#### **What is child sexual abuse?**

A child or young person is sexually abused when any person uses his or her authority over the child/young person to involve the child/young person in sexual activity.

Child sexual abuse involves a wide range of sexual activity including: fondling genitals, masturbation, oral sex, vaginal or anal penetration, penetration by a finger, penis or other object, voyeurism and exhibitionism. It can also include exploitation through pornography or prostitution.

Sexual abuse is called "incest at law", or "intrafamilial sexual abuse" when the abuser is a member of the child or young person's family, for example parent, sibling or uncle.

#### **Some beliefs about child sexual abuse are:**

##### **Children are too young to understand what has happened to them.**

In reality, even children too young to have the language to describe what has happened to them can be effected psychologically and physically.

##### **Children will forget, get over it quickly or just grow out of it. Therapy only makes them remember and upsets them.**

Children can retain memories of what has happened to them. Again, even if they don't have the words to describe what happened or the ability to understand it, they can continue to react to things.

Events, situations, feelings, sounds, smells, etc. can trigger memories.

Therapy provides children with a chance to make connections between these reactions and their experience, to make sense of it all and to manage their thoughts, feelings and behaviour more effectively.

##### **A lack of observable behaviour or responses means a child has not been upset by events.**

Actually, some children become super-efficient, incredibly well-behaved and great achievers. However this can come with an edge of being perfectionist or obsessive, having inappropriately high self standards and harsh self-assessments

Such children can find it very hard to express their needs or put themselves first occasionally.

##### **Child sexual abuse only occurs in lower socio-economic groups.**

Child sexual abuse is not about race or class. It is perpetrated by people from all walks of life, including those in positions of power and social and community standing.

##### **Children who have been sexually abused grow up to be adults who sexually abuse.**

This is not an automatic progression. Most children who have experienced sexual abuse do not grow up to abuse others.

- Some children may act out their experiences with other children as a way of making sense of it, or because they do not know better.
- Some children may have learned through their experience that the only way they can be valued is in being sexual.
- Some young people may act out sexually or take risks with sexual behaviour as a way of regaining



control over their lives.

- Many others show no such effects from their experience.

**Mothers know about the abuse, are complicit in it and/or should have prevented it.**

Perpetrators do everything they can to conceal their criminal behaviour from any witnesses. Strategies used to conceal their behaviour include:

- Building trust with a child and their family;
- Using emotional and physical coercion, isolation and threats of physical harm to the victim and others to exact silence and secrecy;
- Saying the mother knows and approves, and no-one will believe the victim;
- Telling the victim that they will be responsible for anything that happens if they speak out.

These strategies can be extremely effective. Many victims of child sexual abuse do not disclose for years.

By perpetuating the lie that mothers know and/or are complicit in the abuse of their children, we may potentially separate the child from the person who is the one most likely to give them support.

We deny and deflect the responsibility of the perpetrator when we assume that mothers can protect their children from abuse.

**When thinking about the impacts of Child Sexual Abuse, it's important to remember several things:**

- Children are sensitive to and aware of changes in their world at all ages and do not have to understand or be able to talk about what has happened to them to be effected by it.
- Any major event, happy or sad, becomes part of the child and his/her life. They can try to forget about it and may even succeed to some extent, but if they have never been able to make sense of it adequately it can come back when they least expect or understand it.
- A child's inner world - the way they think and feel about themselves and their experiences - may not be observable to or recognised by those around them, even those who know them well.
- What works or is true for adults may not work for children. They do not necessarily recover more quickly than adults just because they are children and may need to return to counseling over the course of their development to help them understand their changing feelings about what happened to them.
- Many adults taken to hospital as children because of sexual abuse, who later had contact with the mental health system, did not recall that abuse. 'Not remembering' is sometimes the only way to cope with such experiences.