



## Myths about incest

What are the commonly held beliefs about incest and child sexual assault?

As with sexual assault in general, there are a number of pervasive beliefs about incest and child sexual assault. Many of these beliefs are myths.

**MYTH** - Children lie about incest.

**FACT**- Both research and the experiences of those who work with sexually abused children have shown that children very rarely lie about incest. Statistics show that in 98% of cases children's statements are found to be true (Dympna House Editorial/Writers Collective, 1990). In fact children are often very reluctant to disclose what is happening to them, making detection difficult.

**MYTH** - Children are sexually provocative.

**FACT** - There is an enormous difference between sexual provocation and the natural love and affection which children display to adults who are close to them. Incest is actively initiated by the offender. It may be accompanied by the use of force, bribery or coercion, relying on a child's ignorance and confusion about what is happening. Children have the right to be able to trust older people to treat them properly, whatever their behaviour.

**MYTH** - Most child sexual assaults are committed by strangers in isolated locations.

**FACT** - The overwhelming majority of children are assaulted in their own home or indeed in the home of the offender who is, on the whole, a someone they know and trust.

**MYTH** - Incest mainly takes place in "dysfunctional", working-class families.

**FACT** - Incest occurs in families of every description and across all socio-economic groupings. Research indicates that there is little to distinguish between families where incest takes place and those where it doesn't.

**MYTH** - People who commit incest are "abnormal" or "sick".

**FACT** - Only a small percentage of perpetrators have a recognisable mental illness. The "average" offender is likely to be a "normal" married person with a family and a job. They are often well respected in the community and otherwise unidentifiable as an offender.

**MYTH** - Sibling incest is not harmful.

**FACT** - Wherever there is an abuse of power incest is harmful. Sexual exploration may be a part of normal development in children. However, it may be exploitative and harmful where there are differences in age, strength and gender and where both children do not have equal control over the situation. Sibling incest is harmful if the behaviour is unwanted by one of the children or it makes them feel uncomfortable or afraid.