

Child sexual abuse.
It doesn't have to happen.

7 Steps to protecting our children



A guide for responsible adults

Darkness to Light

Confronting child sexual abuse with courage.

7 Steps

to preventing, recognizing
and reacting responsibly
to child sexual abuse.

What is child sexual abuse?

- **Any sexual act between an adult and a minor** or between two minors when one exerts power over the other.
- **Forcing, coercing or persuading a child to engage in any type of sexual act.** This, of course, includes sexual contact. It also includes non-contact acts such as exhibitionism, exposure to pornography, voyeurism and communicating in a sexual manner by phone or Internet.
- **An agonizing and traumatic experience** for its victims.
- **A crime** punishable by law.

What is Darkness to Light?

We are a grassroots national non-profit organization based in Charleston, South Carolina that seeks to protect children from sexual abuse by placing responsibility squarely on adult shoulders. We educate adults to prevent, recognize and react responsibly to child sexual abuse. This booklet is a way for you to begin.

This booklet is only the beginning.

Child sexual abuse is a very complex problem. And this booklet touches on only a small part of it. The information we provide is not a substitute for the advice of professionals. It is only to give you simple, proactive steps to help protect children.



darkness to light

Darkness to Light

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“My school has a program to teach children about sexual abuse prevention—but what about adults? Shouldn’t they be more responsible than a six-year-old?”

A child’s safety is an adult’s job. Children are often taught how to keep themselves safe from sexual abuse — and that’s important for them to learn — but that’s no substitute for adult responsibility. We make sure our children wear seat belts. We walk them across busy streets. We store toxic household cleaners out of reach. Why, then, would we leave the job of preventing child sexual abuse solely to children?

Imagine how difficult it is for a child to say “no” to a coach.

Even the most trusted adults can’t always be trusted. Coaches, teachers and parents are authority figures children feel they can trust. Yet, a large percentage of those who sexually abuse children come from this group. These are adults who have the opportunity to “groom” children with affection and attention, making it difficult for children to identify certain attention as abuse. And they know that children have been taught to “mind” them. This is why child-focused prevention programs must be supplemented with programs that focus on adult responsibility.

Step 1

Learn the facts and understand the risks.
Realities—not trust—should influence your
decisions regarding your child.

**“We live in a beautiful,
safe neighborhood. None
of these children could
be suffering from sexual
abuse, right?”**

**It is highly likely that you know a child who has been or is
being abused.**

- Experts estimate that one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before their eighteenth birthdays. This means that in any classroom or neighborhood full of children, there are children who are silently bearing the burden of sexual abuse.
- 67% of all reported sexual assaults (including assaults on adults) occur to children ages 17 and under.
- The median age for reported sexual abuse is nine years old.
- 22% of the victims of sexual abuse are under eight.
- 50% of all victims of forcible sodomy, sexual assault with an object, and forcible fondling are under twelve.
- Most child victims never report the abuse.
- Sexually abused children who keep it a secret or who “tell” and are not believed are at far greater risk than the general population for psychological, emotional, social and physical problems often lasting into adulthood.

**And it is also likely that you know an abuser.
The greatest risk to our children doesn’t come from strangers
but from our friends and family.**

- 34% of victims are abused by family members.
- A further 59% are abused by people the family trusts—abusers frequently try to form a trusting relationship with parents.
- A large number are abused by older or larger children.
- People who abuse children look and act just like everyone else. In fact, they often go out of their way to appear trustworthy to gain access to children.
- Those who sexually abuse children are drawn to settings where they can gain easy access to children, such as sports leagues, faith centers, clubs and schools.

**“It can’t happen in
my family. I could
tell if someone I
know is an abuser.”**

Yet 93% of all victims
know their abusers.



Step 2


Minimize opportunity.

If you eliminate or reduce one-adult/one-child situations, you'll dramatically lower the risk of sexual abuse for your child.

Step 3

Talk about it.

Children often keep abuse a secret, but barriers can be broken down by talking openly about it.



More than 80% of sexual abuse cases happen in one-adult/one-child situations.

Reduce the risk. Protect your child.

- Understand that abusers often become friendly with potential victims and their families, enjoying family activities, earning family trust, and gaining time alone with the children.
- Think carefully about the safety of any one-adult/one-child situations. Look for group situations where possible.
- Drop in unexpectedly when your child is alone with any adult.
- Set an example by personally avoiding one-adult/one-child situations with children other than your own.
- Monitor your child's Internet use. This is one way that offenders interact privately with children. They use the Internet with the goal of luring children into physical contact.

Reduce the risk. Insist on policy.

- Lobby for policies eliminating one-adult/one-child situations in all youth-serving organizations, such as faith groups, sports teams, and school clubs. These policies should ensure that all activities can be interrupted and observed.
- Question program administrators and avoid organizations that do not do careful screening and background checks on all persons working with children.
- Insist that youth-serving organizations train their staff to prevent, recognize and react responsibly to child sexual abuse.
- Ensure that youth-serving organizations have policies in place for dealing with suspicious situations and reports of abuse.

“My daughter tells me everything. I know she would tell me if someone molested her.”

Understand why children won't "tell!"

- The abuser shames the child, points out that she let it happen, or tells her that her parents will be angry.
- The abuser is often manipulative and may try to confuse the child about what is right and wrong.
- The abuser sometimes threatens the child or a family member.
- Some children who do not initially disclose abuse are afraid or ashamed to tell when it happens again.
- Children are afraid of disappointing their parents.
- Children are afraid of disrupting the family.
- Some children are too young to understand. Many abusers tell children the abuse is "okay" or a "game."

Know how children communicate.

- Children who do disclose sexual abuse often tell a trusted adult other than a parent. For this reason, training for people who work with children is especially important.
- Children may tell "parts" of what happened or pretend it happened to someone else to gauge adult reaction.
- Children will often "shut down" and refuse to tell more if you respond emotionally or negatively.
- If your child does not talk to you, don't think it's a sign of poor parenting.

Step 4

Stay alert.

Don't expect obvious signs when a child is being sexually abused. Signs are often there but you've got to spot them.

Talk openly with your child.

Good communication may decrease your child's vulnerability to sexual abuse and increase the likelihood that he will tell you if he is sexually abused.

- Teach your child about her body, about what abuse is and, when age-appropriate, about sex. Teach her words that help her discuss sex comfortably with you.
- Teach your child that it is against the "rules" for adults to act in a sexual way with children and use examples.
- Start early and talk often. Use everyday opportunities to talk about sexual abuse.
- Teach your child that it is your responsibility to protect him from sexual abuse.
- Teach your child you can only protect her if she tells you when something is wrong.
- Listen quietly. Children have a hard time telling parents about troubling events.

One survey showed that only 29% of parents ever mentioned or discussed sexual abuse with their children.

And even then, most failed to mention that the abuser might be an adult friend or family member. Plus the discussions often occurred too late.

"Is my son's withdrawal due to pre-teen angst or is he being sexually abused?"

Learn the signs.

- Physical signs of sexual abuse are not common, although redness, rashes or swelling in the genital area, urinary tract infections or other such symptoms should be carefully investigated. Also, physical problems associated with anxiety, such as chronic stomach pain or headaches, may occur.
- Emotional or behavioral signals are more common. These can run from "too perfect" behavior, to withdrawal and depression, to unexplained anger and rebellion.
- Sexual behavior and language that are not age-appropriate can be a red flag.
- Be aware that in some children there are no signs whatsoever.

If you find physical signs that you suspect as sexual abuse, have the child physically examined immediately by a professional who specializes in child sexual abuse.

A child advocacy center can guide you. To find a center near you contact National Children's Alliance at www.nca-online.org/members.html or call 1-800-239-9950. The opportunity to convict a child molester may depend on forensic evidence from an examination.



Step 5

Make a plan.

Learn where to go, who to call
and how to react.

“My 11-year-old daughter said my husband, her stepfather, sneaks into her room at night. Then she said she made the whole thing up. Now she won’t say anything. I don’t know what to do.”

Don’t overreact.

If your child breaks an arm or runs a high fever, you know to stay calm because you’ve mentally prepared yourself. Reacting to child sexual abuse is the same. Your reactions have a powerful influence on vulnerable children.

When you react to disclosure with anger or disbelief, the response is often:

- The child shuts down.
- The child changes his story in the face of your anger and disbelief, when, in fact, abuse may actually be occurring.
- The child changes his account around your questions so future tellings appear to be “coached.” This can be very harmful if the case goes to court.
- The child feels even guiltier.

Very few reported incidents are false.

Offer support.

If you think through your emotional response before you even suspect abuse, you’ll be able to respond in a much more supportive manner.

- Believe the child and make sure he knows it.
- Encourage the child to talk but don’t ask questions. You might confuse and upset her. If you must ask questions to keep her talking, ask open-ended ones like “what happened next?”.
- Seek the help of a professional who is trained to ask questions about child sexual abuse. Professional guidance could be critical to the child’s healing and to the criminal prosecution of the offender.
- Assure the child that it’s your responsibility to protect him and that you’ll do everything you can for him.
- Report or take action in all cases of suspected abuse, both inside and outside the immediate family. The safety of a child is far more important than any emotional conflict you may have to face.
- Don’t panic. Sexually abused children who receive psychological help can and do heal.

An appropriate reaction to a child’s report of sexual abuse can start the healing process for the child and end one cycle of abuse.

Step 6

Act on suspicions.

The future wellbeing of a child is at stake.

"A child in my class told me that her neighbor sexually abused her. What should I do?"

Child sexual abuse is a crime.

Know the legal requirements for reporting:

- All 50 states require that **professionals** who work with children report reasonable suspicions of child abuse. Some states require that **anyone** with suspicions report it. Information about each state's requirements is available at www.darkness2light.org (click on "Get Help") or call the Childhelp USA National Child Abuse Hotline, 1-800-422-4453.
- If you are a professional who works with children, (e.g., a teacher, a nurse) there are special procedures and reporting requirements you must follow. Your employer should provide mandated reporting training.

Know the agencies that handle reports of child abuse:

- Two agencies handle most reports of child abuse
 - Child Protective Services (in some states this agency has a different name)
 - The police
- Some states designate Child Protective Services as the agency that accepts reports of suspected child abuse. Others designate the police. Some do not designate or designate both. Many states have centralized toll-free lines that accept reports of abuse from the entire state. To find out where to make a report in your state, visit www.darkness2light.org (click on "Get Help") or call the Childhelp USA National Child Abuse hotline, 1-800-422-4453.
- **If the legal system does not provide adequate protection** for a child, contact Justice for Children, 713-225-3457 or www.jfcadvocacy.org.

By acting on suspicions of child sexual abuse, you will save not only one child, but perhaps countless others.

Because many of those who sexually abuse children have multiple victims.

You may be faced with a situation where you suspect abuse, but don't have proof. Suspicions are scary, but trust your instincts. Have the courage to report the abuse.

What if I'm not sure? Where do I go?

- **Child advocacy centers** coordinate all the professionals (legal and social services) involved in a case. If you're unsure about whether to make an official report or just need support, contact a child advocacy center. They will help you evaluate your suspicions. To find one near you, contact The National Children's Alliance at www.nca-online.org or 1-800-239-9950.
- **Child Abuse Helplines** have staff specifically trained to deal with questions about suspected child sexual abuse. Call Darkness to Light's helpline, 1-866-FOR-LIGHT to be routed to resources in your own community, or call the Childhelp USA National Child Abuse Hotline, 1-800-4-A-CHILD.
- **Local Community Agencies**, such as local hotlines, United Way offices, or rape crisis centers can often help.
- **Talk to the child's parents** (as long as they are not the abusers) and provide educational materials, such as this booklet. If the parent seems indifferent or unlikely to take action, call one of the other recommended sources.

These resources can help if you are unsure about whether abuse has occurred, but they do not substitute for making an official report. Remember that you may be a mandated reporter in your state and you may be the only source of protection that the child has.

Step 7

Get involved.

Volunteer and financially support organizations that fight the tragedy of child sexual abuse.

"What can I do to help children in my community?"

Get involved by donating your time and resources to support organizations such as these:

- Prevention programs
- Child advocacy centers
- Crisis information and referral services
- Rape crisis centers

Use your voice and your vote to make your community a safer place for children.

- Support legislation that protects children.
Visit www.darkness2light.org for legislative information.
- Demand that the government puts more resources into the fight against child sexual abuse.
- Call and write members of Congress.
- Write letters to your newspaper.

Break the cycle of silence.

If child sexual abuse is part of your history, do not keep silent. By breaking the cycle of silence, you will break free from the trauma you carry within you and begin an important healing process. And you will help protect other children from suffering the way you did.

There are 39 million survivors of child sexual abuse in America today.

Let the prevention and the healing begin.

The bibliography for this booklet can be found in the 7 Steps Bibliography portion of the Darkness to Light website, www.darkness2light.org.

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