

Sexual abuse of children

Published 12 December 2005.

Sexual abuse of children refers to sexual acts targeted at children or under-aged adolescents by adults. Paedophilia refers to an adult's steady sexual interest in children. Incest, in turn, refers to sexual acts between the members of the same family (except between spouses).

The abuse of young children has received the most attention in the media. However, the most common victims of sexual harassment and abuse are teenagers or children over the age of 10. The older the child or adolescent, the more common the experiences of harassment and abuse become. In a survey on school-aged children eight per cent of girls and three per cent of boys reported that they had experienced sexual abuse. Two girls in a thousand had been harassed by their biological father and three per cent of girls by their step-father. Sexual abuse of boys within the family is extremely rare.

Even though abuse within the family is rare, the abuser often is familiar with the child. They either belong to the child's immediate circle (a relative outside the immediate family, a friend of the parents) or make efforts to become the child's friend.

Parents and other adults can reduce the child's risk of becoming abused. Young children need adult supervision because they themselves cannot prevent abuse from happening. With older, almost school-aged or school-aged children the matter can be discussed, such as children being told not to leave with strangers. The risk of abuse increases if children lack the company of adults and desperately need adult attention. This is one of the reasons why it is very important that parents devote enough time and attention to their children.

Children must be able to rely on their parents' support even in difficult situations in order to have the courage to tell them about the abuse and ask for help. This is why you should react leniently even when children do something wrong and discipline them gently. Children must feel that they can trust their parents.

If an adult notices or suspects that a child is being sexually abused at home, s/he can report it to the local child welfare authorities, even anonymously. A person employed by the state, a municipality or a parish is required by the child welfare act to file a report.

An adult who engages in sexual acts with a person under 16 years of age is guilty of a crime. It is also a crime to purchase sexual services from a person who is over 16, but under 18. If there are little differences in the age and developmental stage of the two parties, sexual acts are not considered abuse; in other words, voluntary sexual relations between adolescents are not criminal offences.

The abuser may persuade, bribe or lure the child or adolescent to sex. The child or adolescent who agreed to have sex with an adult is not guilty of any criminal act. S/he can therefore seek help without having to fear punishment. The responsibility lies with the adult and the child's consent does not relieve the adult of the criminal responsibility.

Where can you get help?

Children and adolescents can talk about the matter to the school nurse, a teacher or the school psychologist. The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare has [a telephone hotline for children and adolescents](#) where you can get advice. The call is also anonymous. You can also contact social workers or [the police](#) in your municipality.

Resources for parents and other adults include the child welfare services, family counselling centres, mental health offices, the police, [Finnish Service for Crime Victims](#), [rape crisis centres](#) and the [parents' hotline of the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare](#).

Those who suffer from a sexual interest in children can contact their local mental health office and in Helsinki the counselling centre of [Sexpo](#).

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