

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.

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.