

**Psychological  
Effects**

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***The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests***

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**Psychological Effects of Abuse**

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Sexual abuse of the youngest children can begin without people recognizing it because it can be a small act in the midst of everyday life.

It can start as a skating-rink employee putting a child in his lap or a relative taking a child off for a while.

Such acts can be innocent and helpful. A grandfather taking a child off to learn fishing can be a grand adventure that leaves nothing but pleasant memories.

On the other hand, another person may take advantage of a child and use time alone for un-innocent purposes. And puberty brings on a whole different set of circumstances and emotional impulses, giving rise to an increase in young men having sex with underage teenage girls.

"The single age with the highest proportion of sexual assault victims reported to law enforcement was age 14," according to a federal Department of Justice report.

The sexual relationships can be consensual: both parties agree. But males having sex with underage girls is illegal regardless of whether they agree, according to the State Attorney's Office in Vero Beach.

One way of differentiating between the good and the bad is acting on suspicions and communicating, officials say. Both adults and children need to be aware that things can go wrong, right in front of their eyes. So experts advise people to be watchful of whether one step leads to another. Don't deny the possibility that abuse can happen anywhere: at home, at church and among friends. Just because people have titles — such priest — doesn't mean they act properly all the time, according to groups that deal with sexual abuse of children.

And sexual abuse can be one act in a person's life. Not all sexual abuse is done by stereotypic repeat offenders. Only a minority of child sexual abuse is done by unsavory adult strangers. Most perpetrators are known by the family or the child. And adolescents are perpetrators in at least 20 percent of the reported cases, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

The following are some suggestions for preventing abuse.

**Adults:**

Let children express affection on their own terms. Do not insist that children hug or kiss people.

Get to know the people at places where children gather in a community.

Pay attention when an adult seems to use social occasions to overly focus on befriending a child, on taking a child away for special time that seems out of the ordinary.

Make unannounced visits to a child's nursery, babysitter, day care center or school. Make sure there are no places off limits to parents.

Check whether a child's school includes sex-abuse prevention training.

Don't allow a child to go alone on vacation, drive around or spend the night with someone other than those proven to be trustworthy.

Don't automatically assume that a person is trustworthy because of their position, title or working in a place where children gather.

Be open when children ask questions about sex. Make the answers age appropriate, but always be willing to communicate.

**Children:**

\* Say no when something feels uncomfortable, very strange or alarming.

\* Don't go along with doing something just because an adult — including a relative or family friend — says do it. This doesn't mean refuse to do household chores that other people usually do.

\* Your private parts are your own. Don't let someone violate your personal space.

\* A stranger who offers "cool" gifts and enticing items may be trying to lead you to a private place, including a car, where bad things could happen to you.

\* Just because a person is an adult doesn't mean they have the right to do things that make you feel queasy or alarmed.

\* Be alarmed if someone asks you to not tell anyone about something strange the person did to you.

\* It is OK to be concerned if someone tries to lead you off alone to a private place that makes you feel uneasy.

\* It isn't worth keeping a friendship if it means doing things that make you feel bad.

Source: National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc. and American Academy of

Pediatrics.

**Myths about sexual abuse:**

- Most sexual abuse is perpetrated by a pedophile, a stranger lurking in the neighborhood.
- Sexual abuse is blown up in the media.
- Boys are rarely sexually abused.
- Incest is infrequent.
- Sexual abuse primarily happens in the lower class.
- Females are never abusers.
- Sexual abuse has a minor impact on children.
- Sexual abusers are usually sent to jail.

Source: Juanita Baker, director of the Family Learning Program, Melbourne, Florida. The state-funded program counsels sexually abused children and their families. Ms. Baker compiled the myths from scientific research reports published around the nation.

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