

What is sexual abuse of persons with disabilities?

Sexual abuse includes a wide range of sexual activities that are forced upon someone.

Sexual abuse consists of sexually inappropriate and non-consensual actions, such as exposure to sexual materials (such as pornography), the use of inappropriate sexual remarks/language, not respecting the privacy (physical boundaries) of a child or individual (e.g., walking in on someone while dressing or in the bathroom), fondling, exhibitionism, oral sex and forced sexual intercourse (rape).

People with disabilities are often unable to stop abuse due to a lack of understanding of what is happening during abuse, the extreme pressure to give in out of fear, a need of acceptance from the abuser or feeling dependent upon the abuser.

It can include any sexual activity with an elderly disabled adult or child by a caregiver, either while providing service for which he or she is paid, or at a caregiving facility or program.

Myths which contribute to sexual abuse

Most sexual offenders develop myths about their victims that they use to justify their own inappropriate and illegal behavior.

The “Dehumanization” Myth

Sadly, people with disabilities are still portrayed and seen as less than full members of our society. Such images allow offenders to justify their offenses because the victim is not really a fellow human being. Since the offender sees himself as more human and therefore more valuable, he sees nothing wrong with exploiting the individual he perceives as less valuable to meet his own needs.

The “Damaged Merchandise” Myth

The damaged merchandise myth asserts that, because the life of the disabled person is worthless, they have nothing to lose in death. If the sexual abuser employs similar reasoning, it allows him to regard his victim’s life as worthless. This provides an offender with a rationalization for the choice of victim, as well as erasing any guilt or inhibition about exploiting a person with a disability.

The “Feeling No Pain” Myth

People with disabilities are often described as immune to pain and suffering. This myth allows offenders to rationalize their crime by saying that the victim really wasn’t hurt by it. Research shows that people with all kinds of disabilities suffer just as much emotional trauma, physical injury, and social consequences of abuse as any other victim (Stuart & Stuart, 1981; Sullivan, Vernon & Scanlon, 1987).

The “Helplessness” Myth

The portrayal of people with disabilities as vulnerable or helpless may contribute to their abuse. The perception of vulnerability is known to affect the selection of victims by sex offenders. One way to fight the myth of helplessness is through empowering education about people with disabilities. We need to develop positive, more realistic images of people with disabilities. A long-term goal for the empowerment of people with disabilities is promoting positive societal attitudes towards disability. By helping our society to see those with disabilities as real people with feelings, needs, thoughts, and talents, we can help dispel some of these myths.

What Can We Do To Lessen The Risk Of Child Sexual Abuse?

- Reliable, nationwide data on abused children with disabilities is needed. The differences of definitions, service criteria, and ways that states report abuse must be addressed.
- Education, welfare, medicine, and the protective service agencies need to set up an interactive network that assures the identification, assistance, and monitoring of these children.
- Training for all personnel (including law enforcement) who come in contact with disabled children and their families should emphasize knowledge about disabilities, reporting requirements, indicators of child abuse, state laws concerning child abuse, and hotline numbers to report abuse.
- Criminal background checks and screenings for all paid caregivers.

What Makes The Disabled Child At Risk For Sexual Abuse?

While the disability does not cause abuse, it can and often does contribute to mistreatment. Children with physical disabilities are at risk for sexual abuse through no fault of their own because they may be:

- Less able to defend themselves physically
- Less able to tell someone about the abuse
- Unable to tell the difference between appropriate and inappropriate physical contact, whether it be abusive or sexual
- More dependent on others for care and, therefore, more trusting of that person they depend on
- Reluctant to report instances of abuse for fear of losing their caregiver
- May be considered less credible than the nondisabled child, when and if they report abuse

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Sexual Abuse and Persons With Disabilities



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