

Resource Article

Sexual Exploitation

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Sexual exploitation has a devastating impact on children and teens. These victims have lost their innocence, virginity, families, homes, and safety. This affects their emotional, spiritual, and intellectual development.

Key Terms

Child sexual abuse: This occurs when a child or young person is used by an older child, adolescent, or adult for his own sexual needs. Sexual abusers are usually men, although some women are also abusers.

Opportunity sex offender: This person has sex with children or teens when the situation allows. For example, this might happen when a relative comes to live with the family and abuses the children or a neighbor abuses a teen when she passes his house every day on her way home from school.

Pedophile: A pedophile prefers to have sex with children. He usually prefers a certain age, gender, or physical look. The pedophile will plan the abuse. For example, he will plan where to go to find children. Sometimes, there is a woman who helps the pedophile. She may lure the children for the male pedophile or participate in the offense in other ways.

Child sex tourism: This includes child and teen prostitution, pedophile-related child abuse, and pornography. It is often part of the local sex industry and may be used by tourists and locals.
Impact on Children and Teens

When young people have been sexually exploited, they feel intense shame, guilt, humiliation, anxiety, fear, and anger. They have lost respect for themselves. They have lost their dignity. They do not trust anyone. The devastating experience changes their perception of the world.

These are some of the things that can happen as a result of being sexually exploited:

- Sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS
- Damaged sexuality (promiscuity, early pregnancy)
- Physical injuries
- Delayed physical development
- Delayed emotional development
- Chronic health problems, including eating disorders
- Headaches and stomachaches
- Short attention span, memory loss, lack of motivation
- Poor attention to schooling
- Running away from home or care center
- Substance abuse
- Self-harm, such as cutting and burning
- Depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Suicide or attempted suicide

What Can You Do?

These symptoms should not be seen as indications of a victim's character. Instead, they are the normal responses to the young person's trauma. Caregivers must try to understand why the child or teen is misbehaving.

You must try to make the connection between how the child or teen thinks and feels and her behavior. If she thinks, "I am a bad person. I have lost my virginity. It is my fault," she may feel worthless and unlovable. She probably thinks no one will want to marry her. She may make choices based on these negative beliefs about herself. She may think that, because she is worthless, she might as well continue in prostitution and get money for sex.

There are several important things that caregivers can do. First, listen to the words the child or teen says—really listen. Provide a safe place for him to talk. Let him know how angry it makes you and how angry it makes God that this happened.

Encourage the child or teen to express her feelings. Once these emotions are expressed, you can begin to deal with them. You can also find someone to help. Take the time to gain the victim's trust. Let her know how very much you care. The process of dealing with her sexual abuse may be a long one. Whenever possible, commit to supporting the child or teen during the entire process.

Offer unconditional love and acceptance. The young person is not to be blamed in any way. Let her know that she is not responsible for what happened.

Let the child know that God loves her. He sees each human being as infinitely special to Him. This child or teen is just as valuable to God today as she was before the sexual exploitation.

When an adult loves a child or teen enough to get involved, the loss and feelings of worthlessness the young person has experienced can be replaced. Victims of sexual exploitation can once again experience a sense of purpose and hope for a better life.

NOTE: Situations differ around the world, so you need to be aware of what is legal where you live and what is safe for the victim. If it is appropriate and safe to do so, let the child or teen know that you will notify the appropriate authorities.