

WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

CHILDHOOD SHOULD be one of the happiest times of our lives.

But children are one of the most vulnerable groups to the dangers of sexual abuse.

"Child sexual abuse is an enormous problem in South Africa. Parents and caregivers should be watching at all times to prevent their children from being abused," said Joan van Niekerk, national manager of Training and Advocacy for Childline.

"If they discover their own or another child has been sexually abused, they must know the best way to help and support the child through such an experience and the child's rights."

Child sexual abuse is any sexual-based act used on any person under the age of 18 years.

The 2007 Sexual Offences Act widened the definition of rape to include anal and oral rape. It has increased the number of sexual offences that can be committed against children including rape, inappropriate touching, indecent exposure, showing or involving children in pornography and grooming children for sexual acts.

It includes the use of cellphones and the internet in these activities.

According to the law, it is compulsory for anyone who becomes aware of sexual abuse to report the matter to police. People who fail to do so can be arrested and prosecuted.

In most cases, people who commit sexual abuse are authority figures known to the child including relatives, immediate family members, teachers or people from the child's community.

There are always emotional and psychological consequences for a child who has been sexually abused and possibly physical consequences such as pregnancy, HIV and sexually transmitted infections, or physical injuries.

Children are never in a position to say "no" to sexual abuse and should NEVER be blamed for being sexually abused. Because the psychological damage of sexual abuse can be long-term, abused children should be counselled. Do not try and force or encourage the child to forget the abuse. Sexual abuse sometimes affects the abuse survivors right into adulthood.



It is the duty of parents to protect their children as far as possible from sexual abuse – and give them their full, unconditional support if they are abused.

The medical exam

A CHILD who has been sexually abused must be examined by a doctor for medical treatment and to gather evidence against the offender.

An SAPS 308 consent form must be signed before the examination. Children aged 12 and older can give consent themselves for an examination and medical treatment.

The examination must be done in private. Remember that a lack of injuries does not mean that the child was not abused.

The child may be uncomfortable during the examination, so prepare and support the child through this process.

An abused child will sometimes require trauma counselling. This is need-

ed to help the child to deal with the abuse. Parents and caregivers may also need counselling.

The child may also require HIV testing and "post-exposure prophylaxis" – or PEP – to prevent other sexually-transmitted infections.

PEP is a free course of anti-retroviral drugs – or ARVs – that prevent HIV infection and must be given within 72 hours of the abuse incident.

But, before being given ARVs for PEP, the child will undergo an HIV test. If he or she is already HIV-positive, they will not be given PEP, but may be referred for ARVs if they qualify. If the child is HIV-negative, they then need to take the full course of PEP.

Reporting the abuse

A CHILD, parent, or any person with an interest in the child, can report abuse at any police station – and police are required to register a criminal complaint.

The child does not have to make a statement immediately, only when he or she is ready to give a detailed account – called an IO – to the investigating officer. But it is important to report the abuse as soon as possible, so that physical evidence against the abuser may be collected.

The child should be told that he or she is brave and doing the right thing. Everything must be in the child's words.

The child has rights, such as being interviewed in private, by a female police officer, to know the case number and get a copy of his or her statement. The child may feel embarrassed to talk about the abuse and should not be forced to talk. The statement can be changed later when the child is ready to give more details.

A child aged 12 or older may sign an SAPS 308 consent form, detailing the incident and consenting to a medical examination – a parent or guardian must sign the form for younger children. The IO is needed to build a case against the abuser. The investigating officer should keep the family informed of any developments and consider any concerns around the child's safety.

Identifying abuse

CHILD SEXUAL abuse can happen to both girls and boys of any age.

But sexual abuse may be difficult to identify – the physical, behavioural or emotional signs shown by an abused child are also seen in children who have not been abused. And some children do not show any signs.

Physical signs include blood on the child's underwear; blood, pain, itching, discharge or tearing in the genital area; an abnormal way of walking or, in the case of girls, missed periods or pregnancy.

Behavioural signs include aggression like breaking things; stealing and lying. They might sleep badly and have nightmares. They might miss school, eat too much or too little. They may act in a sexually mature way or use play sexually. They might cry too much, be irritated or have temper tantrums. They might show fear or anger to a specific person or object. The child might also develop wrong ideas about sex, sexuality and their own bodies. They become more "clingy" and over-dependent – or fearful of being touched.

Tips to keep kids safe

CERTAIN situations increase the risk of child sexual abuse. Parents and caregivers of children can play an active role in reducing some of these risks:

- ★ Protecting children is everyone's responsibility – and men have an important role to play, by both protecting their own children and setting a positive example to other men.
- ★ Know where children are at all times.
- ★ Ensure children are accompanied when they walk to and from school.
- ★ Do not leave children at home on their

own or with people you don't know well.

- ★ Encourage children to play in groups.
- ★ If your toilets are far from your home, don't let children go alone.
- ★ Don't send children to taverns or she-beens to buy liquor.
- ★ Teach children not to accept lifts from strangers.
- ★ Explain the difference between "good touch" and "bad touch".
- ★ Speak openly with children about their rights.

Childline

Childline is a national organisation that for the past 24 years has been concerned with protecting children from all forms of abuse and neglect, including child sexual abuse. There are regional Childline offices in all nine provinces, which provide a number of services. These include:

- ★ The national toll-free Childline crisis line on 0800 055 555, which receives calls on a wide variety of issues.
 - ★ Prevention and education programmes in schools, communities and elsewhere.
 - ★ Training of counselling volunteers.
 - ★ Treatment services to abused children and their families.
 - ★ Networking and co-ordination of services to children.
 - ★ Advocacy on children's rights.
 - ★ Programmes for rehabilitation of sexual offenders.
 - ★ Some offices also offer court preparation services, safe emergency care and face-to-face counselling by social workers.
- Childline can also be reached on www.childlinesa.org.za

The court process

Here are some tips for testifying:

- ★ You are entitled to testify in the language of your choice, using an interpreter.
- ★ Answer questions slowly, clearly and as truthfully as possible.
- ★ You may ask for a question to

be repeated if you don't understand.

- ★ Remember, you have no control over how the magistrate will decide on the case or the fate of the accused. What is important is that you and your child do the best you can, in order for justice to be served.

Offer support

ONCE YOU discover that a child has been abused, how you respond will have a strong influence on how the child deals with the trauma.

You must remove the child from the abusive situation and be as supportive as possible. This includes:

- ★ Let them tell you what happened in their own words.
- ★ Listen to them and encourage them to talk.
- ★ The child must know you believe them and in him or her.
- ★ You must keep telling the child it is not their fault.
- ★ Let your child express his or her feelings. Show sympathy and don't be judgmental, about either the child or the abuser.
- ★ Do NOT tell the child to forget or ignore the abuse.
- ★ Be available to the child when he or she needs you. Some become withdrawn others may need physical closeness.
- ★ Accept that the child may be negatively affected – but set limits on how anger and other "acting out" signs are expressed.
- ★ Encourage the child to do school, home activities and play. Routine is important and should be re-established as quickly as possible.
- ★ Don't promise the child what will happen to the abuser.
- ★ Never promise a child that you will keep the matter secret. You do not want to become another adult who broke their trust.
- ★ Do not blame yourself for what happened.