

AREAS OF LIFE AFFECTED BY CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Ability to Trust

Most commonly in sexual abuse cases, the perpetrator of the abuse is a trusted person to the child. After being abused by a trusted adult, the child learns to be suspicious of all adults. The child also learns that eventually, trust will be broken, and they will have to suffer for it. Children often also feel betrayed by the parent(s) who were unable to prevent or stop the abuse. In addition, it is difficult for children to trust new relationships with counselors or caseworkers that are brought in to help the family.

Self-Image

Because it is taboo to talk about sexual abuse, and because the perpetrator is seldom held completely responsible, child victims feel that they are different from other children. They may feel different because they have been abused, but also because they think there is something wrong with them for becoming a victim.

The question, “Why me?” often grows into a sense of shame if children are not validated for their strengths. Children who feel shame often begin to reinforce this shame with deviant behavior – this is their only way to answer the question of why this happened to them.

Knowledge about Sex

Sexual abuse teaches children sexual behavior that is inappropriate for their age and development. They learn to respond to their world sexually, not because they want sex, but because children naturally reflect to the world what they learn about themselves and how the world works.

They also learn that sex and sexuality are about power and control. This is why some older child survivors seem to use their sexuality to manipulate adults. The reality is that this behavior is evidence of the trauma of sexual abuse. Many years after being abused, teens and young adults are often still trying to understand what happened to them and why.

Relationships

A child who has been sexually abused learns that relationships are not mutual, but involve one person having all the power. Even when the child discloses, often her/his wishes are the last to be considered or validated and therefore the child continues to be disempowered.

Safety

Sexual abuse teaches the child that she/he is unable to control what happens to her/his body or environment. Safety in general becomes a major concern for children who have been sexually abused. Children who have been sexually abused do not feel safe in their bodies, emotions, thoughts, relationships, or environments.

Development

Children who have been sexual abused often regress to earlier developmental stages or get stuck in a current developmental stage. On the flip side, sexually abused children are given information that is inappropriate for their age and development so they may be too advanced in some areas while stunted in others.