



## Dealing with Child Sexual Abuse – A Toolkit

*\*This document acts as an information toolkit in understanding and addressing childhood sexual abuse – though there are many statistics available they have not been included in this document; statistics are not always an adequate reflection of current phenomena, though sufficient research and statistics exist that certain 'known facts' can be stated with confidence.*

*\*This document contains information that may be triggering to individuals – this author recommends making use of counselling / therapy in addressing triggering content and or in processing trauma.*

*\*This document is not a complete or exhaustive exploration of child sexual abuse, nor is it intended to be a legal document, or a specific guideline in replacement of contacting the appropriate authorities with regards to child abuse, sexual or otherwise – all child abuse should be reported to the police and child protective agencies.*

### Information on Childhood sexual abuse:

A child is considered to be any person under the age of 18.

Children are at risk of being sexually abused by adults, and by other children – all sexual activity with a person under the age of 18 is considered abuse if the child appears coerced, exploited, if the action is based upon intimidation, or if the action in any other way resembles abuse (including physical, mental, emotional, neglect) - regardless of claimed consent by the minor and regardless of partner age.

Specific laws are outlined in California Penal Code 11164-11174.3 - this illustrates the dimensions of child sexual abuse, and child abuse. There are specific state laws regarding age-appropriate sexual interaction between minors (any person under the age of 18).

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is an umbrella term that encompasses all forms of child abuse that center around sexualization – this includes rape, molestation, exposure, photos, videos, stories, and coercion. That means: all forms of sexual intercourse with any part of the body, or object; inappropriate touching, fondling etc.; exposure of genitals, breasts, buttocks, or genitals (etc.) through clothing with the intention of sexual arousal or gratification, exposing children to photos of adults and/or of children who are naked or in sexually provocative poses / also taking photos of children naked or in sexually provocative poses / or with adults in similar poses; exposing children to pornography and/ or sexualized media (pictures, videos, stories, drawings).

The importance of understanding appropriate vs. inappropriate exposure of children to sexual themes is in understanding the process of 'grooming' – the action of befriending and or introducing children to sexual themes with the intention of gaining access / attempting to normalize sexualized behavior in order to engage sexually with children (or have them engage in child abuse – sexual or otherwise).

### Who Harms Children?



Children are at risk of sexual-harm from adults and from other children – the reasoning and rationale for sexually abusing a child is varied, though the responsibility for causing the harm is always the perpetrators. This becomes more complex when CSA involves child-child interaction.

Adults who are sexually *attracted* to children are *commonly* referred to as Pedophiles, though this does not fully encompass the spectrum of people who may present a risk toward children, nor does it specifically indicate that a person with a Pedophilic Disorder (a sexual attraction lasting at least 6 months that involves recurrent, intense sexual fantasies, urges, action toward a child 13-years or younger by a person 15-years or older) will go on to harm a child.

CSA does not always relate only to sexual attraction toward children –CSA is a complex case of mental disorder, power-dynamics, substance / alcohol abuse, mental distress, pre-existing trauma, deviant behavior, anti-social behavior, and pre-existing cross-spectrum child abuse scenarios. **People who are victims of CSA are not an automatic risk to children.**

Any use or distribution of media (photographs, videos etc.) that depicts child sexual abuse is inherently harmful to children as it both perpetuates CSA and feeds into it.

Minors engaging in 'sexting' of photos or words constitutes CSA, sending or sharing such media is considered distribution of child sexual abuse centered pornography.

Children are at a higher risk of CSA from people they know – this includes immediate family members, family friends, extended family members, neighbors, and those in positions of power (teachers, coaches, religious figures, community leaders etc.). **There is no evidence to relate adult sexual orientation (straight or LGBTQ) with risk to children for CSA.**

### How Does Sexual Abuse Impact Children?

Sexual abuse has the potential to impact an individual's life-course throughout their lives.

- Children may regress to an earlier state of functioning as a defense mechanism, and as an impact of the trauma.
- Children may engage in self-harm.
- Children may withdraw, isolate, change their behavior.
- Children may act out through aggression, defiance, self-harm.
- Children may experience anger, guilt, confusion, and distress.
- Children may begin sexually acting out / behaving in sexually inappropriate ways.
- Children may develop mental health difficulties – depression, anxiety, ticks, ritualistic behavior, phobias, reactivity, etc.
- Children may go on to engage in substance abuse, self-harm, dysfunctional relationships, risk-taking, etc.
- Children may experience poor outcomes in school and life-functioning – impacting their early adulthood.
- Children may have 'boundary confusion' with peers and adults, further impacting their early adulthood and placing them at a higher risk of revictimization.



## What to Say to a Child:

If you suspect a child has been sexually abused it is important to remember that they are a victim – CSA is such a horrific act that it gives rise to anger in us, therefore it is very important to not allow that anger (which is based in fear) to translate into how we talk to children who are victims. We must :

- Tell the child that we believe them – so few children ‘invent’ or ‘lie’ about CSA that we should immediately believe them; in the rare event that a child does fabricate an abuse allegation it should be considered an indication that something else is troubling the child and appropriate help should be sought.
- Not ask for specific details – children look to adults for how to frame and conceptualize their experiences, talking to them about details (especially re-framing details with them) can impact their ability to relay the abuse (and process it) with a professional.
- Contact the authorities – the police have specially trained officers to address CSA. Agencies such as Child Protective Services (CPS) and therapeutic services are trained to support child victims. CPS are tasked with assisting and protecting children, they will act as a ‘hub’ to gain services for victims.
- Ask the child what they need to feel safe – this can encompass being (or not being) in a specific area, having access to a comforting object, wanting to express anger or sadness, and having / not having physical contact.
- Ask open ended questions, do not try to lead children in their answers – demonstrate that uncertainty is OK (if a child does not know what they need, or is unable to express how they feel) – adults can help children by creating a safe and supportive space around them that does not pressure a child into thinking or behaving in a certain way.
- Promote wellbeing – ensure that children follow a regular routine of eating and sleeping. Adults must contact the authorities, even if children do not want that to happen – adults must model accountability and safety through services; this will help children to re-frame their experiences outside of what happened to them (which is often distorted).
- Educate children on the risks of CSA – this means having frequent and open conversations with them about appropriate and inappropriate contact. Children live through a revisionist lens, meaning that all things are subject to change as they explore their environment, and this can be manipulated / they can be coerced into breaking a rule that adults thought was concrete.
- Normalize that physical and sexual safety are as important and OK as rules for crossing the road – help children to develop a shared language with you about safety and risk.



## What to Do as Adults:

Adults represent the primary safety-net for children – it is our responsibility to create safe and supportive environments for them. Adults can be responsible for challenging and changing culture. Adults should:

- Allow children agency and sovereignty over their own bodies; this means not forcing children to accept or give hugs / affection if they do not want to.
- Not use sexualized terms around children / or refer to children in sexualized ways – talking about them as attractive in a way that forecasts their adult sexuality / attractiveness.
- Be aware of what we share on social media regarding children – photos, places they frequent etc. – check your privacy policy when sharing images and information.
- Set specific rules about appropriate engagement with adults; accepting presents from adults, going places with adults, breaking rules, keeping secrets etc.
- Talk to children about the importance of being honest and brave, encourage children to tell you what they experienced, even if you don't suspect something happened – this normalizes conversations around agency and sovereignty with children.
- Teach children how to say NO to adults.
- Teach children how to ask for help from adults if they are scared or threatened.
- Teach children how to use the 'buddy system' – CSA often happens in isolation, teach children that it is OK to ask that a friend is with them at all times; this reduces the risk of children being isolated and coerced.
- Teach children that it is OK to ask for clarification – i.e. "Thank you for that offer but I will have to ask my parent first".
- Be aware that children we interact with may be victims of CSA – set boundaries with children and encourage them to respect them. Advocate for appropriate boundaries and explain to children what is appropriate – i.e. "Tommy I don't like it when people give me a hug without asking, I'd prefer a hi-5 because it makes me feel more safe".
- Teach children that it is OK to ask for alternative types of contact: A hi-5 instead of a hug.
- Teach children about internet and phone safety – telling adults about contact, and that secrets are not acceptable, it is OK to have friends, but keeping secrets is not safe.



- Do not allow children to access age-inappropriate content: Media like adult themed films, games, and or music often contain references to sexualized content and themes that can act as a 'springboard' for grooming and or 'normalization' of sexualization.
- Help children to understand that you cannot 'get someone in trouble' for something they didn't do, and similarly that if someone 'did' something then they are responsible for getting themselves into trouble – children are often confused by CSA, worrying that they will get into trouble or that the perpetrator (who has often befriended them or romantically engaged them) will get into trouble. Help children to understand boundaries.
- Help children to understand the kind of false information and lies that can be used to coerce them – threats to harm them or their pets or family etc. / threats of being taken away or something terrible happening to them. Create an environment where children feel safe within your family, and not at risk.
- Children are often confused by CSA because it can have a sexually arousing impact / or it begins with sexual grooming that can initially cause confusing feelings – it is important to educate children on their bodies and sexuality – children become sexually curious at an early age, but it must always be age-appropriate.
- Look out for children displaying or demonstrating inappropriate sexual knowledge – words, references, actions etc. This can be an indication that children have been exposed to inappropriate content or situations.

## Culture and Law

We collectively create culture, and we are all responsible for contributing to the development of laws – agencies attempt their best to look into the backgrounds of individuals they hire, but a background check is only as good as an existing report. Making a report to the police and or CPS if you suspect child abuse contributes to building a network of information that can help prevent harm and identify / catch abusers.

Review local and state laws, contact your congress-person if you wish to petition for laws to be changed.

This document has been created by Daniel James Keegan O'Connell, a licensed clinical social worker – more information on Daniel can be found at [www.danieljamesoconnell.com](http://www.danieljamesoconnell.com)

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