

Effects of Child Sexual Abuse:

Behaviors, Feelings and Relationships:

✚ Running away

✚ Substance abuse

✚ **Suicide attempts and suicide – Thoughts** of suicide are common for children who are being sexually abused and feel trapped by the abuse. Suicide ideation may result from post-traumatic stress disorder and may result from the child's feelings of self-worthlessness, anxiety, guilt, shame, rejection (especially after placement in foster care), abandonment (especially if the family refuses to believe the child, literally abandons the child or blames the child for the sexual abuse). Suicide is often viewed by children and youth who feel helpless and powerless to be their ultimate and final effort to regain control, exert total self-control and control of the impact of the suicide on world around them.

✚ **Inappropriate sexual behavior and Sexual behavior beyond the child's age** – Children may use toys for (or involve others in) sexual activities. They may initiate sexual interactions with older persons, masturbate continuously or publicly and may behave seductively or provocatively toward others. They may also have an overdeveloped understanding of (and/or vocabulary regarding) sex for their age. They may also have learned to believe that their only way to gain friendships, to attach, to relate to others, to get their needs met and to experience love and belonging is through sex.

✚ **Immature or Regressive behavior**- Behaviors such as thumb sucking, soiling, wetting...the child may behave as though he/she is younger in order to feel safe from a perceived threat in the environment. The child may "regress" to an earlier age or stage of development where he/she felt safe and protected.

✚ **Pseudo-mature behavior (acting older)** - This is outwardly mature appearance and behavior which results from children having to assume adult roles and taking on responsibilities beyond their years. The child may disobey adults when the child resents being placed into an adult-to-child relationship with the foster/adoptive parent when the child is used to functioning in an adult-to-adult sexual relationship with the person who abused. Due to the adult role that the child had to assume, the child may fail to complete childhood developmental tasks.

- ✚ **Over-compliant behaviors**- This is an effect of the child being controlled by others in a power relationship. The child felt helpless and without choices. Therefore, they may lack assertiveness and the ability to take control of their own lives.
- ✚ **Aggressive behaviors** – Victims of sexual abuse feel anger over the manipulation and trickery, the lack of choice or control, the lack of protection and the loss of a normal childhood that they experience during and after the abuse. Often because the child's anger is misunderstood, misinterpreted or ignored by the adults in the child's life, the child develops behaviors that more intensely and more directly express the child's anger and rage. Breaking objects, fighting, hurting others physically, cursing, threatening others, etc. are common expressions of the child's anger. Children may also use aggressive behaviors (including molestation and sexual aggression against peers or younger children) in order to regain feelings of control and/or to identify with and understand the person who abused him or her.
- ✚ **Self-destructive behaviors** – Children who have been sexually abused may cause self-injury or participate in self-mutilation as a way of expressing the inner-pain and the self-hatred that they can't express to adults verbally. They may also use self-injury as an attempt to self-disclose the sexual abuse. For children from strong religious backgrounds who have deep feelings of guilt after being sexually abused, self-injury may be used as a form of self-punishment (especially if the child experienced pleasure from the sex)..
- ✚ **Poor peer relationships and inability to make friends** - Children of families where there is incest are usually not given many opportunities outside of the home to make and/or maintain friends. This results in delayed social development).
- ✚ **Lack of trust in self and others** - This results from the child's feelings of being manipulated, controlled and tricked by the person who abused the child; and feelings that the non-abusing caretaker failed to protect the child.
- ✚ **School problems or fears** – Children who are sexually abused channel much of their time and energy that should be devoted to school and learning into preoccupations about the abuse incident(s), keeping the abuse a secret in order to protect the family and/or the person who abuses, performing adult roles, surviving the abuse. They may also have problems in relating to other children and creating peer relationships that would support a successful school experience.
- ✚ **Afraid of people of the same sex and/or age of the person who abused**
- ✚ **Afraid of places similar to where the abuse occurred** (such as bathrooms, basements, barns, attics, bedrooms, etc.).
- ✚ **Sleep difficulties and sleep disturbances** - (especially if the abuse took place in a bed or the child's bedroom).

+ **Nightmares and Night Terrors**

- + **Somatic Symptoms and Feigning illness** – Children may pretend they are sick or actually become ill to avoid, or protect themselves, from unpleasant experiences. Children may have learned to fake illness in order to avoid incidences of sexual abuse.
- + **Lack of personal hygiene** – Lack of personal hygiene and personal care often results from the child's poor self-esteem, low self-worth, feelings of worthlessness and of being "damaged goods." Children who have been sexually abused may also use poor personal hygiene as a means of self-protection by making themselves undesirable sexually.
- + **Over-dressing** – A child who has been traumatized by the sexual abuse may overdress such as wearing a heavy coat in hot weather. This additional clothing may be used to hide what the child perceives to be his/her "damaged," "dirty or used" body. To the child, the additional clothing may also serve as an "armor" that protects the child from damage.
- + **Provocative dressing/Under-dressing** - Children who have been sexually abused may use provocative dress as an outward expression of their need for attention, friendship, love and belonging. They have learned through the sexual abuse that sex is a way to please adults and to attract and create attachments.
- + **Exhibitionism** – The child may inappropriately exhibit his or her body or genitals in public or openly in the home.
- + **Frequent daydreaming (dissociation)** – This is especially true for children who used dissociation as a means of escaping the reality of the sexual abuse. Children who have been sexually abused may also appear to be in a trance-like state while masturbating.
- + **Excessively active**