

# WHAT IS SEXUAL ABUSE?



Sexual abuse occurs when a person forces a child to have any form of sexual contact or makes a child perform sexual acts. Sexual abuse may involve touching private parts (clothed or unclothed), penetration using an object or body part, forced sexual acts between children, or making the child view, read, or participate in pornography. These acts are abuse even when offenders say they were gentle and did not hurt the child.

Sexual abuse can include molestation and exploitation. Sexual molestation does not always mean sexual intercourse. Sometimes older children abuse younger or smaller children. Sexual acts between children become abuse or molestation when one child uses coercion, force, or violence to get the other child to do the acts. These acts should be reported and youth with problematic sexual behavior problems should be referred to social service agencies so they can receive help.

Sexual abuse is often overwhelming to children, especially when an adult is involved. Most children are taught to trust adults. They tend to believe what adults tell them is true rather than rely on their own feelings. This works against them in two ways. If the abuser tells the child what is being done is okay, the child may doubt his or her own feelings that the abuse is inappropriate. Likewise, if a caregiver's initial reaction to the child's abuse report is "This can't be true!" the child may wonder if his or her own feelings are wrong. Children almost never tell about abuse "to create problems." Most often, they fear that telling will make people angry at them. It is extremely difficult for children to report abuse.

