What Is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse is the involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexual activities with any person older or bigger, which they do not fully comprehend, and to which they are unable to give an informed consent. This definition emphasises a number of things. Firstly, sexual abuse may be committed not only by adults but by anyone older or bigger. Often the perpetrators of sexual abuse are teenagers who take advantage of the vulnerability of much younger children. Sexual abuse is an abuse of the power and authority which comes from being older and bigger than the child victim. Secondly, the ‘consent’ of the victim is irrelevant. For that reason, many people speak in terms of ‘child sexual assault’ to emphasise the criminality and the non-consensual nature of the offence. Not all sexual abuse of children is the result of coercion. Often, sex offenders prey upon needy and vulnerable children who come from difficult home situations and who crave love and attention. However sex with such children is a form of exploitation. Their consent is not a mature and informed consent, and it does not provide a defence to criminal charges.

Sexual abuse takes a number of different forms. Often it is talked about as if all the victims of child sexual abuse have similar experiences and suffer similar effects. The reality, however is quite different. Abusive behaviour includes a range of activities, such as exposing oneself to a child, engaging in voyeuristic activity, showing the child pornographic pictures, fondling a child's genitalia, getting the child to fondle the adult's genitalia, oral-genital contact, masturbation, penetration of a girl's vagina with a finger or object, vaginal intercourse and anal intercourse. For some children, the sexual abuse occurs just once, and the perpetrator is an acquaintance or a stranger. For others, the abuse continues regularly for years and the perpetrator is a parent or other trusted adult. For some children, the sexual abuse is accompanied by violence; for others it is coerced by threats; others still are enticed into sexual activity, and may become willing and active participants in the sexual relationship. For some, the sexual abuse begins before they are school-age. For others, it begins when they are about 9 or 10 years old, and for others still, only after puberty.

As the nature of sexual abuse varies from one case to another, so does the harm it causes. For some children, the most traumatic aspect of the abuse is not the sexual abuse but the violence which accompanies it. Children who are the victims of violent sexual attacks are often threatened with serious harm if they ever tell anyone. For other children, the worst aspect of the pain is the impairment of their self-esteem as they blame themselves for what has happened or are persuaded by the perpetrator that they are bad or worthless. For others still, the pain derives from a sense of
betrayal - that a parent, teacher or youth leader who was in a position of trust and was meant to protect them betrayed that trust and used them for his sexual gratification. This sense of betrayal can be both deep and debilitating even if the child rejected the perpetrator's sexual advances and no physical contact occurred. For other children again, the greatest harm comes from the turmoil of emotions, as fear and sexual pleasure, gratification and shame are intermingled. Children who are sexually abused sometimes experience sexual feelings, since this is a physiological response to sexual stimulation; but that tends to be coupled with shame and confusion in both the short and long term.

For other children still, some of the greatest long-term damage is caused by being introduced to sexual relations when they are far too young to be able to cope with sexual feelings and experiences. Many abused children have sexual love awakened much too early, and once awakened, it is difficult for them to cope with their sexuality. These children sometimes find it difficult to have a caring relationship with another person which does not involve sexual intercourse. Thus it is not uncommon for child victims of sexual abuse to become promiscuous as adults, and to have difficulty in establishing stable relationships with the opposite sex. Others respond to the sexual abuse in the opposite way, finding it very difficult to include sex in a loving relationship because they associate sex with being used.

Although not all children are adversely affected by episodes of sexual victimisation, many victims find that it affects their whole lives. Sexual abuse is frequently associated with severe depression, mental illness and marital problems twenty, thirty, even forty years after the abuse has ended.

**How Widespread Is Child Sexual Abuse?**

Despite its prevalence throughout history, it is only in the last few years that we have become aware of how widespread the sexual abuse of children is. The most reliable indications of the extent of sexual abuse in our society come from studies of adults who have been asked about their experiences as children. Necessarily this means that they are describing the extent of sexual abuse many years ago, but there is little reason to believe that the present generation of children is more or less in danger of abuse than previous generations.

These surveys of adults about their childhood experiences of sexual abuse all indicate that the number of children having such experiences is very high indeed. Nonetheless, the surveys have produced varying estimates of the extent of sexual abuse, depending on how the survey defined sexual abuse, the age limit taken, the way the survey was conducted and many other factors.¹ A common pattern is that the

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more in-depth the interview is, the higher the rates of sexual abuse which are revealed. Child sexual abuse is not easy to talk about to strangers.

*The sexual abuse of girls*

Almost all surveys have indicated that the sexual abuse of girls is very common. One of the most well-known surveys done of sexual abuse in childhood was the landmark research conducted by David Finkelhor in the United States towards the end of the 1970s.\(^2\) Finkelhor interviewed about 800 students about their experiences of sexual molestation as children. He defined sexual abuse as occurring where the sexual incident involved a child under 13 and a perpetrator who was at least five years older, and where the young person was 13-16 years old and the other person was at least 10 years older.

Finkelhor asked questions about all forms of sexual experience in childhood including situations where men exposed themselves to them, or made sexual advances which the child rejected. He found that 19\% of the women reported some such experience where the perpetrator was an adult or a much older adolescent. When Ronald and Juliette Goldman conducted a similar survey of nearly 1000 students in Australia, they discovered even higher rates of abuse.\(^3\) Nearly 28\% of the women responding to the survey reported some sort of abusive sexual experience before the age of 16.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SEXUAL ABUSE OF GIRLS: AUSTRALIA</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 13, partner over 18</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 13, partner under 19 but 5 yrs older</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 13-16, partner at least 10 years older</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Goldman and Goldman, 1988.\(^4\) Sample 603 females.

Although these were both surveys of college students, the results are broadly consistent with surveys which have been conducted of the general population. A study of 710 Australian women randomly selected from the electoral rolls found that 20\% had experienced child sexual abuse involving contact.\(^5\)

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4. Ibid, 98.
### RELATIVES WHO ABUSE GIRLS: UNITED STATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uncles</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological fathers</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brothers</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First cousin</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepfather</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandfather</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other male relative</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female relative</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Russell, 1983. 5 186 cases

About 90% of all sexual abuse of girls is by men. There are some cases where the abuse is by both a male and a female together.

Only a minority of abusers are relatives, although most victims know the perpetrator. Diana Russell’s study of 930 women in San Francisco found that a total of 29% of the perpetrators of abuse were relatives, 60% were known to the victims but unrelated to them, and 11% were total strangers. The amount of sexual abuse of girls by uncles and step-fathers is particularly high. More fathers abuse their daughters than stepfathers, but fewer children grow up with a stepfather. In Russell’s study, one in six girls who had grown up with a stepfather were sexually abused by him. In contrast, one in forty girls were abused by their natural father. 7 Similar results have emerged from other studies. 8 There is such a thing as an incest taboo. Men who bond with their biological children from birth are much less likely to look on them sexually than men who come into the household at a later stage and who have no such attachments to the child. Furthermore, stepfathers often have difficulty finding what their role should be within the family where they do not have the same authority as natural parents. It is more likely therefore that they will look on a child within the household as an object of sexual gratification than if they were well-established in a parental role towards the child.

These surveys need to be put into perspective. The majority of the experiences which the adults reported on were isolated incidents. While single instances of sexual

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6 D Russell, "The Incidence and Prevalence of Intrafamilial and Extrafamilial Sexual Abuse of Female Children" (1983) 7 Child Abuse and Neglect 137 at 140-141.
abuse (such as rape) can cause the most severe trauma, a single instance of sexual contact by an adult without coercion may sometimes not have particularly negative effects. Children can be very resilient. In particular, children with high self-esteem and good family support are able to deal with a great range of unpleasant and distressing experiences in childhood. Nor did all respondents in these surveys view their sexual experiences negatively. Some even had a positive view of their experience, although this is a more common reaction for boys than girls. Of course, the fact that a person does not perceive the experience as negative does not necessarily mean that the sexual contact was harmless. Sometimes, the extent of the harm resulting from sexual abuse is only apparent many years later. Such delayed harmful effects are most likely where there was no therapeutic intervention in the immediate aftermath of the abuse.

**Sexual abuse of boys**

Although the majority of victims of child sexual abuse are girls, a substantial number of boys are abused as well. Indeed, where young children are abused, there are almost equal numbers of boy and girl victims.

From all the evidence available, it is a reasonable estimate that about 1 in 10 boys are sexually abused in childhood. David Finkelhor's survey of students in the United States, and Ronald and Juliette Goldman's similar survey of students in Australia, both found that 9% of boys had been sexually abused in childhood, a significant proportion of them being sexually abused by adolescents at least five years older. The national survey conducted in Britain by a market research organisation found that 8% of males reported being abused. Other surveys have reported figures as high as 16%. Although boys are abused less frequently than girls, a greater percentage of boys experience ongoing molestation. The Goldmans' survey in Australia, for example, found that 48% of the boys reported that their abuse lasted more than a week, in contrast to 28% of the girls.

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SEXUAL ABUSE OF BOYS: AUSTRALIA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 13, partner over 18</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 13, partner under 19 but 5 yrs older</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 13-16, partner at least 10 years older</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>9%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Child sexual abuse and other sex offences**

Men who sexually abuse children may also commit other sex offences. For example, Abel and his colleagues found that 25% of the men who targeted girls outside of the family also committed rape. 29% were exhibitionists and 14% were voyeurs. Similarly, the fact that a man is arrested for a sex offence where the victim is an adult does not mean that he is not also a danger to children. Of the 126 rapists in their study, 44% had engaged in the extrafamilial sexual abuse of girls, 14% in the extrafamilial abuse of boys, and 28% in exhibitionism. Many rapists were also incest offenders. Similar results have been found in other studies.  

Offenders may also commit non-sex offences. In one study, we examined the criminal records of 30 child molesters prior to, and up to 10 years after an index event of sexual abuse for which they were convicted. 73% had convictions for other offences, 60% had convictions for offences other than sex offences, 50% had convictions for property offences, 27% had convictions for offences involving violence and 23% had convictions for drug offences. Offending levels for nonsex offences were significantly higher than the general adult male population.  

**Women who Abuse**

Another of the myths which has been challenged by recent research is the idea that females are rarely guilty of sexual abuse. While the great majority of offenders are male, it is clear now that many women also abuse children. Sexual abuse by mothers is quite rare, but abuse by women generally is not uncommon. From the available research, it has been estimated that about 20% of the abuse of boys is by

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females, and about 5% of the abuse of girls. However, there is still some debate about the numbers of female offenders. Certainly, very few cases of sexual abuse by females are reported. 3 per cent of sex offenders that appear in British courts are women and of that 3 per cent, half of them are charged with a male co-defendant.

There are indications from some studies that the behaviour of some men convicted of rape and other forms of sexual assault on women may be linked to unresolved feelings of anger and rage at their own childhood sexual molestation by female perpetrators. Studies of imprisoned adult rapists have demonstrated that of those who reported being sexually molested as children, a significant number were molested by women. In one study of 348 adult sex offenders, 31% had been sexually molested as children, and in 41% of these cases, the perpetrator was female. In another study of 83 men who were imprisoned for raping women, 59% had been molested by women when they were children, and more than 82% of the abuse involved intercourse.

Women who abuse are very likely to have been abused themselves as children. In one study, more than 90% of female perpetrators reported histories of being abused as children.

**Why Do People Sexually Abuse Children?**

There is no one explanation for why people abuse children. Child molesters may or may not have a definite sexual orientation towards children rather than adults. It used to be very common to classify sex offenders into fixated and regressed offenders. Fixated offenders are said to be those who have a primary sexual attraction towards prepubescent children, while regressed offenders have a primary sexual orientation towards adults, but also abuse children episodically. This clear division into two categories of offenders is falling into disuse now, since experts working with offenders have found that many offenders are somewhere in between.

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19 R Wyre, Evidence to the Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service, (Paedophilia Inquiry), April 26th 1996.
20 N Groth and A Burgess, "Sexual Trauma in the Life Histories of Rapists and Child Molesters" (1979) 4 Victimology 10-16.
22 F Knopp and L. Lackey, Female Sexual Abusers: A Summary of Data from 44 Treatment Providers (Safer Society, Orwell, Vermont, 1987).
the two groups. Some offenders, indeed, are sexually abusive towards both children and adults, so there are problems in identifying them as having a clear sexual orientation to one group or the other.

The sexual abuse of children is therefore not linked solely with a definite sexual orientation towards children. Many incest offenders, for example, have a primary heterosexual orientation towards adults, and are married men who have an active sexual relationship with their partners.

There are other sex offenders against children who are socially and sexually inadequate. These are men who are sexually attracted to adult women, but who lack the social skills to form adult relationships and abuse children as a non-threatening substitute for sex with an adult. These men may be developmentally delayed, and have not learnt the social skills necessary to relate appropriately to their own age group. Their sexual experience with children is likely to be the only sexual experience that they have had.

There are also other men who offend against children because of antisocial tendencies. Their sex offending, against both children and adults, is part of a broader pattern of criminal behaviour. These men may not be responding to a particular sexual orientation towards children, although they may be sexually aroused by violence generally. Their sex crimes may well be opportunistic crimes committed while carrying out a burglary or some other criminal offence.

Some offenders are episodic offenders only, while others habitually target children to abuse. Those who are episodic offenders only may turn to children at times of particular stress in their lives. This does not mean that stress is the cause of their problems. It is a common excuse for offending behaviour that the man was experiencing stress at the time or had marital difficulties. However, every one experiences times of great stress, and many have marriage difficulties, including sexual difficulties. Most do not react to these pressures by sexually abusing children. Thus stress is not the cause of the problem nor the reason why abuse has occurred. It may, however, be a catalyst for the man to offend at a particular time.

*Sexual attraction to children*

While the sexual abuse of children is not linked solely with a sexual orientation towards children, nonetheless, a great many offenders do have a primary sexual attraction to children. They are sexually aroused by pictures of children.

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27 Ibid.
use child pornography. They fantasise about sex with children, not only in
masturbation but even while having intercourse with an adult woman. They gain an
erotic enjoyment from having children as companions, and they have established a
pattern of acting upon their sexual feelings.

It is not clear why some people develop a sexual attraction to children. Paedophilia is
a diagnostic term for those who have such an attraction, and it is listed as a paraphilic
disorder in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual
of Mental Disorders. There it is said that paedophilia "refers to the recurrent, intense
sexual urges and arousing fantasies, of at least six months' duration, involving sexual
activity with a prepubescent child." There is some evidence that for many
paedophiles, the patterns of interest in children begin in early childhood, and that the
sexual interest of children who grow up to be paedophiles is different from those who
grow up to have normal heterosexual patterns.

**Grooming the Child**

The sexual abuse of children is usually carefully planned and stage-managed. It is
usually premeditated. In the process of grooming, the perpetrator creates the
conditions which will allow him to abuse the children while remaining undetected by
others, and the child is prepared gradually for the time when the offender first engages
in sexual molestation. It is a process which has been acknowledged frequently by
offenders in treatment programmes, and it may take weeks or even months.

It can be very difficult for people to understand how a man can sexually abuse his
children or step-children without his wife ever finding out, even by accident. There
are ways that this can occur. For example, one father who abused all his children,
made the bath time his special time alone with them, away from the mother. This was
his particular contribution to the child-rearing, and he used this natural situation to
abuse the children. Another father made it his habit to be alone with his child, reading
to her at bedtime, and it was at these times that he molested her. At other times, the
abuse may occur on regular occasions when the wife is out for an evening, or engaged
in some other activity. There are some perpetrators who are extraordinarily brazen
about the abuse. They fondle the child (for example by moving their fingers
underneath the child’s pants) even when others are around.

The offender may groom the child through a variety of means. One means of
grooming is by forming an alliance with the child. Typically, a father or step-father
will show special attention to a particular child, giving her treats and in subtle ways

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isolating her from her mother. One offender acknowledged in interviews with researchers that he went along with anything his step-daughter wanted. Another said he bought his daughter presents, let her stay at girlfriends, and showed her favours which he didn't show to any other of the children.\textsuperscript{32} In this kind of way, the offender forms a particular bond with the child. He develops a pattern of spending a lot of time alone with her. He may well treat her emotionally like an adult friend, sharing intimate details about his sex life and adult relationships.\textsuperscript{33} The child thus, quite inappropriately, becomes the man’s confidant.

Gradually, as she responds to his attention and affection, he initiates a degree of sexual contact which is explained as being a special way in which he shows his love to her. He may talk more to her about sex, and show her sexually explicit pictures. As time goes on, this sexual intimacy increases. Gradually, the relationship is transformed from being that of father and daughter until the stage is reached when the father treats the child as a lover rather than a daughter. This transformation of the relationship can be very confusing and difficult for the child. On one level, she remains his daughter with all that means in terms of his power and authority over her. Yet in secret, he relates to her quite differently, as sexual “partner” and lover. The feelings of pleasure or of being special are usually mixed inextricably with feelings of guilt, shame and even a sense of betrayal that the father has abdicated his purely paternal role.

Another form of grooming is that the sexual abuse occurs through a gradual process in which the offender moves from innocent to sexual touching. At times such as bathtimes when it is natural for the child to be unclothed or scantily clothed, the perpetrator may begin getting the child used to the touching of the child’s genitals, perhaps by a special washing routine or by playing games which involve ‘accidental’ contact with sexual organs. He may be partially undressed himself as they splash water together, or he may get into the bathtub with the child. Similar kinds of activities might occur at the child’s bedtime, or on occasions when the child gets into the bed of the parent.

Gradually, over a period of time, the sexual contact becomes more explicit and invasive, until it clearly crosses the line between appropriate and inappropriate contact. Because the grooming occurs gradually, the child may not realise that the boundary line of appropriate behaviour has been crossed, even though the sexual contact may make her feel very uncomfortable. By blurring the boundary lines between normal and abnormal parent-child interactions, the parent causes the child to be confused about what is appropriate behaviour and what is not, and the extent to which she ought to be able to have a realm of bodily privacy which her father or step-father should not invade.

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\textsuperscript{32} J. Conte, S. Wolf and T. Smith, "What Sexual Offenders Tell Us About Prevention Strategies" (1989) 13 Child Abuse and Neglect 293-301.
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Sexual abuse can go on for years in some families before a child realises that other Daddies don't behave in the same way with their children at night-time. Parents have the power and influence to define the child’s reality, especially when the child is kept relatively isolated from other children and adults. The activity may feel wrong to the child, but if Daddy says it is okay, then it is okay. Understanding behaviour as a form of abuse requires a frame of reference which does not derive solely from the perpetrator’s own explanations. Thus, the child may define the activity as being aversive without realising that it is abusive.34 One of the aims of education programmes for children concerning their protection is to give them that alternative frame of reference.

Another feature of the grooming process is that often the child is alienated from the mother and other siblings. This can occur in many different ways. It is not uncommon, for example, for the father to claim that his wife's sexual unresponsiveness is a justification for the sexual relationship with the daughter, and the daughter may come to resent the mother for this. Another false message is that the mother knows what is happening and doesn't care, so there is no point turning to her for comfort.35 Alienation may also occur as a result of the special attention shown to the child. Siblings may be alienated because of the special favours and privileges that the target child has received. Child victims may also be alienated from their friends because the father dominates the child’s life and discourages normal interactions with peers.36

The child’s compliance may also be secured in other ways. Often the perpetrator will secure a child's acquiescence by offering a plausible reason to the child for the abuse. The father may tell the daughter that he is giving her a bit of sex education, or preparing her for her future husband, or that this is the way all Daddies show love to their daughters. A grandfather may convince the child that it is his role to give her a special examination of the vagina to make sure she is medically "alright".

These various means of grooming the child and securing his or her acquiescence are not mutually exclusive. They can occur together in various combinations. Furthermore, such methods may have been learnt. The techniques of grooming may be passed on from one offender to another, or the offender may replicate his own experience as a child.

**Patrick Parkinson**