

## How Does Abuse Affect Victims?

Although there is no definitive study on the matter, various studies of drug abusers, prostitutes, adolescent runaways, juvenile offenders and sexually dysfunctional adults show that a high percentage of them were sexually traumatized as children. However, a child sex abuse victim does not necessarily suffer severe consequences.

As we all know, human beings are extremely quick to bounce back from traumatic events. We experience, respond to, and recover from traumatic events throughout our lives. Children are particularly tough. Simply *growing up* requires resilience, diligence, perseverance, and flexibility.

When a child is sexually abused, there are *always* consequences. The severity of the impact and the ability of the child to recover are affected by a number of factors. For example, children who have loving, supportive family members and friends are better able to bounce back following a traumatic event than those who don't have a strong personal support structure. Other relevant factors include:

- Frequency: How often did the abuse occur?
- Intensity: What kinds of abuse were inflicted?
- Duration: How long did the abuse continue?
- Betrayal: What was the level of betrayal based on the relationship between the abuser and the victim?

Children who are abused can suffer a wide range of consequences—from discomfort, to serious psychological and physical distress. Children and adult survivors are prone to blame themselves for the abuse they suffered and are frequently immersed in shame and guilt. Their ability to trust themselves or others is severely damaged, and personal boundaries are shattered, leaving them vulnerable to additional abuse. In addition to the *shifts* in behavior that are common with victims of sexual abuse, they also may experience long-term emotional disorders and distress including:

- Extreme anxiety.
- Depression.
- Hostility toward others.
- Inappropriate sexual behavior.
- Poor self-esteem.
- Tendency toward substance abuse.

Clinical findings of adult survivors of child sexual abuse also include problems in interpersonal relationships associated with an underlying mistrust. Generally, adult victims of incest have a severely strained relationship with their parents marked by feelings of mistrust, fear, ambivalence, hatred, and betrayal. These feelings may extend to all family members.

The effects of child sexual abuse on adults also include eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, promiscuity, disassociation from emotions, substance abuse, as well as the probability of victims, themselves, becoming abusers. Adult victim-survivors typically have issues of mistrust underlying their relationships, and are prone to blame themselves for abuse they suffered as children.

Even if the trauma is slight and the damage minimal, the price of child sexual abuse—the devastation of innocence and the theft of virtue and wholesomeness—is too high. It behooves each of us to become protectors of children—to prevent the abuse from occurring rather than concentrating our efforts and resources on repairing the damage.

In this imperfect world, we must never lose sight of the potential victims around us. Be vigilant of others in your environment. Look for the behaviors that indicate someone may have been abused. Be sensitive to the factors that impact a victim's ability to bounce back from a serious trauma. And be a role model by practicing appropriate behaviors and requiring the same of others.

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