

Myths About Child Sexual Abuse - Part 1

For many adults, the mere mention of child sexual abuse fills them with fear. They rely on myths and half-truths to convince themselves that “this could never happen in my family” or that this type of thing would never occur in their community or Church.

When adults are ignorant about the nature, scope, and facts surrounding child sexual abuse, the risk to children grows. Dispelling the underlying fear is an important part of the process for reducing the risk to children.

Some adults have a tendency to rely on myths about sex abusers as if those myths are *the truth*. Correcting the myths, however, will dissolve the false sense of security that many people share—a sense of security they feel until someone in *their* family or parish becomes a victim. This is the first of a two-part series on myths surrounding sexual abuse of both children and adults.

There are myths about abusers and myths about victims. Look in any popular dictionary and you’ll find *myth* defined as something similar to the following: “a fiction or half-truth, especially one that forms part of an ideology, or a fictitious story, person, or thing. A person or thing existing only in imagination, or whose actual existence is not verifiable.”

Here are some of the most prevalent myths about child sexual abuse:

- **MYTH:** *Sex abusers are dirty old men—easily recognized by anyone on the street.*

FACT: Sex abusers look like their neighbors, friends and acquaintances—the people they work with, family members, and other trusted adults and adolescents. Abusers come from all income brackets, and all ethnic, racial and other demographic backgrounds. In fact, in recent surveys, there was virtually no difference in the race or ethnicity percentages of abusers when compared to the race and ethnicity of the victims being surveyed. In addition, slightly more than 26 percent of those who sexually abused a female relative under the age of 18 were also under the age of 18 at the time of the abuse.

- **MYTH:** *Strangers are responsible for most child sexual abuse.*

FACT: The primary perpetrators of abuse are trusted adult males in the child’s life. They are people adults know and trust with their children. Studies estimate that only 11 percent of abuse is committed by strangers. Family members or relatives commit another 29 percent, and 60 percent is committed by other persons known to and trusted by the child and the child’s family.

- **MYTH:** *Most sex abusers are homosexuals.*

FACT: Most sex abusers are men, but not necessarily homosexual. Even most adult males who victimize boys do not identify themselves as homosexual. They are people who get sexual pleasure from activities with children and are attracted to the particular characteristics of the young male body. Most child molesters have trouble sustaining adult relationships but they marry at some time in their lives.

- **MYTH:** *Most sex abusers are stepfathers or live-in boyfriends.*

FACT: Current statistics show that uncles account for the largest percentage of incest cases when the victim is a female child. In a recent study, 25 percent of female victims identified an uncle as the perpetrator. The same study indicated that natural fathers are more likely to abuse than stepfathers (14 percent were natural fathers and 8 percent were stepfathers). Studies demonstrate that among victims of incest, uncles and natural fathers are the most likely offenders. However, evidence indicates that a female child is more vulnerable to sexual abuse by someone other than a family member when there is a stepfather in the home. Several studies found that stepdaughters are more vulnerable to victimization by the stepfather, the parents’ friends, or other men.

- **MYTH:** *Incest is rare.*

FACT: Incest, as used here, is any sexual activity between blood relatives that involves an adult and a minor child. Incest is the primary form of child sexual abuse. The vast majority of victims know their abusers and 4.5 percent of women report having had an incestuous experience with their father before the age of 16.

- **MYTH:** *Children usually lie about sexual abuse.*

FACT: Children rarely lie about sexual abuse. Fewer than 6 percent of all allegations are intentionally false—5 percent of allegations by adults are intentionally false, and less than 1 percent of allegations by children are intentionally false.

- **MYTH:** *The reason priests abuse children is their vow (or promise) of celibacy.*

FACT: Most child molesters never took a vow of celibacy and most people who took a vow of celibacy never abuse children. The few priests who abuse children do so for the same reason that other adults abuse children—they are sexually attracted to children. Eliminating the vow of celibacy would not eliminate the problem of priests who sexually abuse children. According to a prominent Catholic writer, “It is intellectually dishonest Catholic-bashing to blame celibacy for the problems of the church or the priesthood.”

As long as adults rely on myths as the framework for dealing with the risks to children, child molesters have vast opportunities to access our children. Dispelling the myths helps to open adults’ eyes to the real warning signs of those who pose a potential danger to children.

It is important that adults resist any tendency to categorize or label abusers or victims. Open mindedness and observation are the keys to protecting our children and removing would-be child molesters from our environments.

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