



adopt

Adoptive Families
Association of BC

Child sexual abuse: A guide for adoptive parents

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Cover photo: Joseph Gonzalez

The Adoptive Families Association of BC is a charitable, accredited, non-profit organization offering adoption support, information, and education. Find out more about AFABC at www.bcadoption.com.

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For more than 40 years, AFABC has offered personalized supports, education, resources, family events, and opportunities to connect with others. We know there is no simple blueprint to being a family. We're here for you at every stage of your journey.

Important note: The staff at AFABC are **not** clinicians. While the following publication is research-based, this guide is not intended to be taken as therapeutic or medical advice, nor is it intended to replace consultation with a clinical professional. If you suspect that your child is being or has been sexually abused, immediately contact the authorities.

A photograph of a man and a woman embracing outdoors. The man is on the right, wearing a light blue checkered shirt, and is kissing the woman on the cheek. The woman is on the left, wearing a blue top, and has her eyes closed. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting with trees.

Child sexual abuse: A guide for adoptive parents

Photo by Gus Moretta

Adoption is a complex way to grow a family. The first few years of placement are often challenging as the new family learns how to attach and be together. Detecting signs of sexual abuse—and then determining a course of action—may leave parents feeling overwhelmed.

As the parent or a guardian of a child who has been adopted from care, it is important to be aware of the signs of a history of abuse. While the statistics around child sexual abuse are startling and heartbreaking, it's important to remember that almost all children can recover from being sexually abused. Though most will require professional help, there is a tremendous amount that parents can also do. Having an understanding, supportive family is one of the biggest factors in a child's recovery.

Even if you know that your child has not been abused, there is information in this guide that is essential reading for all parents. The children who are most likely to become victims are kids who feel detached, alone, or isolated—all feelings that foster kids and older adopted children may experience. Though the media scare us about stranger abduction and abuse, most children are in greatest danger within their own homes and communities. For these reasons, knowledge about sexual abuse is vital for all parents, especially adoptive parents.

If you do suspect that your child has a history of abuse, it is important to remember that you and your child are not alone. There are lots of resources for families to help a child heal from former sexual abuse. While this guide is just a starting point, our Family Support workers are always available to speak. Though not clinicians, they can provide free, confidential support and help you access more resources.



Photo by Chris Benson

Becoming sexual abuse aware

Child sexual abuse is any sexual contact perpetrated by an adult or older child against a child. Usually, the adult or older child is in a position of power or authority over the victim. It's important to note that even infants can be sexually abused.

Sexual abuse is something that happens to a child. It is not a diagnosis. It is very important to connect with professional, clinical support if you suspect that your child is being or has been sexually abused.

Legally, you are required to make a police report if you suspect that a child—regardless of whether they are under your care or not—is a victim of sexual abuse.

Potential indicators of abuse

While there are certain signs that may indicate sexual abuse, it is very important to understand that these indicators may also

be related to other factors in a child's life. Other factors could include things such as problems at school, the loss of a loved one, or family issues like divorce.

These signs also don't necessarily indicate whether the abuse is current or historic. If you suspect that your child has been a victim of sexual abuse, making an appointment with your family physician or pediatrician can help determine whether the abuse is in the past or ongoing.

Sexual indicators

- Blood or discharge in bedding or clothes
- Resisting removal of clothes when normal (e.g., bedtime, bath time)
- Sexual knowledge or language that is too advanced for the child's age
- Games involving secrets and nicknames for acts or body parts
- Inappropriate sexual behaviour, play or language directed at adults or peers

- Excessive masturbation, penetration with fingers or objects, masturbation in public places
- Sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, prostitution

Non-sexual indicators

- Negative response to a person
- Scratches, bruises, itching, rashes or injury that doesn't match the explanation
- Sudden or extreme changes in mood, behaviour, personality, performance in school
- Regressed behaviour such as wetting the bed or thumb sucking
- Nightmares, sleep problem without explanation
- Fear of being harmed or of being alone—especially at night
- Change to eating patterns
- Depression, anxiety, self-mutilation
- Suicidal ideations or attempts
- Loss of confidence
- Using drugs or alcohol

- Poor personal hygiene
- Fire-setting; sadistic play; lying, stealing

What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse doesn't always involve touching. Non-physical sexual abuse is also something that parents and adults who work with youth should be aware of.

Physical sexual abuse includes touching of the genital or breast area, forced touching of other's genitals, penetrative intercourse, or oral sex.

Non-physical sexual abuse can include behaviours such as exposing a child to sexually explicit material or sexually explicit acts, flashing one's genitals, sexually intrusive questions or comments, or asking a child to masturbate in front of others. It's important to note that this list is not inclusive of all of the ways in which sexual abuse can occur. If you suspect that a child is being sexually abused, you must contact the authorities right away.





Photo by Jordan Whitt

Receiving a disclosure

If a child tells you about abuse, it's because they think you can help. The child is also letting you know that they want the abuse to stop. Telling is the first step to recovery.

Disclosures often unfold gradually through a series of hints. Children may use hints to test the reaction of the person they are telling. If the child is ready and your reaction has been positive, the child may follow up with a bigger hint. Hints may come in many forms, and can be easy to miss. A few examples might be:

- I don't want to go to Jake's house again.
- Please come to Jake's house with me.
- I don't like the games Jake wants to play.
- Jake did stuff I don't like.

Remember, children often can't express themselves in the same way as adults—especially around sex. Try to see things through a child's lens.

You can increase the chances that your child will disclose past or present sexual abuse by:

- Learning about sexual abuse.
- Teaching your child about personal safety.
- Being emotionally available to your child.

Why kids don't tell

- Fear of being disbelieved
- Fear the abuser will punish them
- Fear that their family will be destroyed
- No one to tell
- No one they trust
- Scared their parents will turn against them
- Worried they or their siblings will be taken into care
- Don't want a medical examination
- Already tried but no one listened

Reacting to disclosure

While talking to your child about their experiences of abuse:

- Report the abuse or suspected abuse to the police or social services immediately.

- Control your reaction: don't overreact.
- Let the child know that the abuse is **not** their fault.
- Praise the child for telling and explain that you believe what they are saying.
- Comfort the child. Say you are sorry that the abuse happened and that you are going to help them get it sorted out.
- Reassure the child that they are safe in your home.

Will kids make up stories of abuse?

Parents often fear that children who have been victimized will go on to fabricate more stories of sexual abuse. They may even fear their child will accuse them of abuse.

According to Darkness to Light, a non-profit committed to ending childhood sexual abuse, only an estimated four to eight percent of abuse reports are fabricated. The majority of false claims are made by adults involved in custody disputes, or by adolescents. If claims are made by a child, it's important for parents to always believe the child and be supportive, even if they question the child's perceptions. Sometimes, children who have previously been abused may interpret affectionate touching as something that will lead to sex because of their history. It's not up to parents to try to tease that out, though. Only a professional can do that. Remember, you must report all claims of abuse.





Photo by Ben Wicks

Do abused kids abuse?

One of the most common fears of adoptive parents—especially when they already have other children—is that children who have been sexually abused will become abusers themselves.

Children like to gather information about everything, including bodies, gender roles, and behaviour. A certain degree of voluntary, spontaneous sexual exploration between children of similar age, size, and development is natural. This behaviour tends to occur during specific periods of childhood. Usually, children will cease this play if an adult discovers them and asks them to stop. If the behaviour persists, it may be time to involve a therapist and step up supervision.

A child who has demonstrated inappropriate sexual behaviour with other children should never be left unsupervised with other children. In some cases, it may be helpful to generate a safety plan. A

safety plan can help ensure that there are clear rules in place for what is appropriate versus inappropriate behaviour. For an example of a safety plan, visit https://www.stopitnow.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/section_2.3.pdf. In some cases, a safety plan may be created solely for the immediate household; in other cases, it may be needed for the child's school or after-school activities. A safety plan should be drawn up in consultation with a professional.

According to specialist Toni Cavanagh Johnson, children with sexual behaviour problems can be divided into three groups: sexually reactive; children who engage in extensive, mutual sexual behaviours; and children who molest other children. Parents of children with a history of sexual abuse should be watchful for any signs that normal sexual curiosity is turning into sexual activity or problematic sexual behaviour.

Sexually reactive

The sexual behaviour of these children often takes place in front of adults. They can be distracted from the behaviour, though it will often reoccur. These children will sometimes touch or act sexually towards another person, but they do not coerce other children. Some sexually reactive children have been abused, and some have not. This type of problematic behaviour is the most common.

Extensive mutual sexual behaviour

These children exhibit frequent sexual behaviours that involve other children. Cavanagh Johnson explains that sexual behaviour gives these children a sense of emotional safety. They are often distrustful of adults, and feel abandoned, isolated, and unattached. They gravitate to other children who also feel “lost” and will collude with them to avoid detection by adults. They may use persuasion, but they do not force other kids to participate in sexual behaviour.

Children who molest

Children who molest other children exhibit intense sexual confusion. Their behaviours are frequent and grow in intensity. Though they do not generally force their victims, they use bribery, trickery, manipulation, and emotional and physical coercion. Their victims can be the same age, younger, or older. They may select them because of a vulnerability like a developmental delay, social isolation, or emotional neediness. These children generally have problems in all areas of their lives and need specialized help.

Can these kids be helped?

Yes! Living in a safe environment makes a big difference for children who exhibit problematic sexual behaviour. According to Cavanagh Johnson, most children can be helped by a thorough assessment followed by therapy. It is important to note that children who molest should not be lumped in with adult sexual offenders. There are many differences between the two groups, including the reasons behind their actions and the kind of help they need.



Setting healthy boundaries for children who have been abused

A child who has been sexually abused will benefit from clear guidelines that set the rules both in the home and outside. Experts in the field of adoption and child sexual abuse believe these guidelines are particularly important during the first year after placement, when the child is working hard to establish new relationships and to build trust.

Privacy: Everyone has a right to privacy. Children should be taught to knock when a door is closed and that adults need to do the same.

Bedrooms and bathrooms: Sexual abuse commonly occurs in these rooms. It is not advisable to bring a child who has been sexually abused into your bed for a cuddle. Cuddling may be overstimulating and misinterpreted. A better place to cuddle may be on the couch.

Touching: No one should touch another person without permission. A person's private parts (the area covered by a bathing suit) should not be touched except during a medical examination or, in the case of young children, if they need help with bathing or toileting.

Sometimes children who have been abused will act out sexually in an attempt to bond with their parent. A child that has been touched in their genital area may try to do the same to an adoptive parent they have grown to love. This is because they've been conditioned by their abuser

to believe sexual touching is a sign of love and affection.

This is an incredibly difficult and upsetting situation that requires the support of an adoption-competent clinical professional. Make it clear that, in your house, you do not have sex with children. If an older child acts out sexually with one of the parents, tell the child that "there is nothing you can do that will make either of us respond sexually to you".

Saying, "No": Children need to learn that it is their right to assertively say "no" when someone touches them in a way they do not like. Help them to practice this.

Sex education: All children, including the child who has been sexually abused, need basic information about how they develop sexually. They also will benefit from an atmosphere in which it is okay to talk about sex. Appropriate words for body parts, such as penis, vagina, breasts, and buttocks, will give the child the words to describe what happened to them.

No "secrets": Make it clear that no secret games, particularly with adults, are allowed. Tell children if an adult suggests such a game, they should tell you immediately.

Wrestling and tickling: Wrestling and tickling—though normal and common—can be confusing for children who have been sexually abused. Keep tickling and wrestling to a minimum.

Keeping kids safe: Reporting a concern

In BC, anyone who suspects a child is being abused or neglected must report it immediately. Phone 1-800-663-9122 at any time of the day or night. Your call will be answered by the Provincial Centralized Screening team (PCS). Their primary role is to receive and assess reports and initial requests for help across the province, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

If a child anywhere in BC needs help, call the Helpline at 310-1234 (no area code needed) any time of the day or night. Your call will be directed to a social worker. This helpline is available for children, parents, and other community members to report abuse.

Children and teens can call the Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 to speak to a counsellor day or night. Counsellors are available to speak anonymously about

concerns, and can help children and teens call the police or child protective services.

When making a report to a child welfare worker, it can be helpful to include your name, your phone number and your relationship to the child or youth, but you can make an anonymous call if you prefer. The child welfare worker will want to know a variety of information, including the child's name and location, whether there are any immediate safety concerns, why you believe the child or youth is at risk, as well as information about the alleged offender. A more detailed list of information can be found on the [Reporting Child Abuse in BC](#) webpage. Note that you do not need all of the information listed in order to make a report; you are only required to tell the child welfare worker what you do know.





Photo by Gift Habeshaw

Seeking professional help

It is very likely that parents of a child who was sexually abused will need professional help and support for themselves and their child. The type of therapy that will be the most helpful (e.g. individual, couple or family therapy), will depend on a family's particular situation.

When a child is being seen in individual therapy, it is important that the parents, who have the primary responsibility for the child, be in close contact with the therapist, or included in the therapy. Try to choose a therapist who is knowledgeable about both sexual abuse and adoption issues and with whom you feel comfortable. Play or art therapy can be extremely helpful with sexually abused children.

Support groups for adoptive parents or sexually abused children and support groups for victims and survivors are helpful resources. Adoptive parents who have had a

chance to talk with others who understand the experience of parenting a sexually abused child say that this kind of sharing is very useful. Dr. Nicholas Groth, a leading psychologist in the field of sexual abuse, along with many children and adult victims survivors, say that groups for children can be extremely effective in the healing process. The opportunity to talk and share with other children who have also experienced sexual abuse reduces a child's sense of isolation and belief that they are the only one to whom this has ever happened.

Taking care of yourself

As a parent, it is your responsibility to put the needs and feelings of your child first. However, it is important to remember that it is okay to seek professional help for yourself. Ensuring you have access to resources and support will help you support your child through their healing journey.

Moving forward, together

If you suspect that your child may be a victim of sexual abuse, it is important to remember that you and your family are not alone. It's also important to remember that the likelihood of your child leading a healthy, fulfilling life is high with appropriate support from a clinical professional.

Recovery from child sexual abuse is an on-going process. As this process unfolds, the child will ideally move from victim to survivor to thriver.

While adoptive parents cannot erase what happened to their child earlier in their life, you have a wonderful opportunity to provide your child with new, healthier experiences. With clinical support and a supportive home environment, most children who have been sexually abused go on to live full, healthy lives.

Family Support Workers

Our Family Support workers are always here for you. While AFABC does not provide clinical services, we are able to refer you to adoption-competent clinicians who can provide professional support to your child and family.

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