

Preventing & Responding to Child Sexual Abuse: What Do You Need to Know? A Toolkit

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What is Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)?

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) can be defined as any type of sexual activity involving a child. This can include physical contact such as touching a child's genitals or breasts, forcing a child to touch someone's genitals or breasts, mouth to genital or breast contact, and intercourse. CSA also encompasses non-contact forms of abuse such as exposing oneself to a child, showing a child sexual content, and photographing a child in explicit positions.¹⁻³

- The CDC² estimates that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 20 boys experience some type of sexual abuse before the age of 18. **However, these figures are likely much higher as many victims do not report their abuse.**⁴
- CSA is characterized by secrecy, physical or emotional coercion, and grooming. Between 80-90% of perpetrators are known and trusted by the family of the abused.⁵ Additionally, predators are also increasingly grooming children online via social media.⁶

What are the signs of child sexual abuse?

Signs of CSA will look different for every child. However, there are several important physical and behavioral markers that may indicate abuse is occurring.⁷

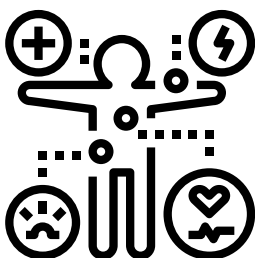
➡ Physical signs can include:

- Bleeding, bruises or swelling in the genital or anal regions;
- Bruises on roof of mouth;
- Bloody, torn or stained underclothes;
- Difficulty walking or standing;
- And pain, itching or burning in the genital area, urinary or yeast infections, and sexually transmitted diseases.

This is not an exhaustive list. Be sure to pay attention to any sudden changes in your child.

➡ Behavioral signs can include:

- Changes in hygiene- either refusing to bathe or bathing excessively;
- Sexual knowledge or behaviors that are not developmentally appropriate;
- Sudden change in behavior- unusually withdrawn, aggressive, anxious, or having trouble in school;
- Nightmares or bed-wetting;
- Overly protective and concerned for siblings, potentially assuming a caretaker role;
- Returns to regressive behaviors, like thumb sucking;
- Runs away from home or school;
- Receives special attention from an adult or older peer - such as gifts, one-on-one practices, excessive compliments;
- Suddenly loses interest in an activity or expresses not wanting to see an individual;
- And secrecy around devices and online habits.



How can we prevent child sexual abuse?

As an individual, you can:

- Learn more about the signs of CSA and grooming so you can intervene;
- Maintain a healthy suspicion of adults that try to create situations for alone time with children, offer special attention or gifts to children, or who seem preoccupied with a particular child;⁸
- Properly vet childcare workers and babysitters who take care of your child;⁹
- Teach kids about boundaries, consent, and proper anatomical terms for their private parts;¹⁰
- Promote strong and open communication with your child. When sexual topics come up, answer your child's questions in an open, accurate, and non-judgmental way;¹¹
- Appropriately monitor children and teens' online activity and educate kids regarding online predators;¹²
- Support legislation like **Erin's Law** to offer CSA prevention training in schools;
- Explore free answers to questions at [whatsok.org](https://www.whatsok.org) when you are unsure if certain observed behaviors crosses a line or constitutes problematic sexual behavior;
- Create a **Family Safety Plan**;
- And talk to other adults in your community about preventing CSA before it happens.



Coordinated Prevention Efforts:

- New research (Noll et al., 2025)¹³ shows that coordinated, community-wide prevention efforts across multiple levels reduce community CSA rates.
- Programs like the **Safe and Healthy Communities Initiative**¹³ combine preventive efforts across:
 - 1) wide-reaching awareness campaigns for community adults,
 - 2) integrating CSA-specific parent training into casework by Child Protective Services,
 - 3) providing psychoeducation to 2nd graders via school-based CSA prevention programs.
- Research¹³⁻¹⁴ suggests **school-based CSA prevention** may be one of the most promising avenues for universal primary prevention of CSA, but it's important to rely on evidence-based programs, such as **Safe Touches** and **ROAR**.

How should you respond to a child sexual abuse disclosure?

For Kids Disclosing CSA:

Children and teens may often disclose their experiences in pieces to test your reaction. They may start by telling only part of the experience, pretending it happened to someone else, or asking indirect questions.¹⁵ Stay calm, supportive, and assure them you are there to help.¹⁶

If a child discloses sexual abuse to you:

- Thank them for telling you.
- Tell them it's not their fault, you *believe* them, and you will get them help.
- React calmly, listen, and be supportive.
- Do NOT ask leading questions, blame the child, or lose control of your emotions.



After reporting to your local authorities, contact your local Child Advocacy Center for support.

Child Advocacy Centers:

- Are child-friendly, trauma-informed resource centers where a professional, multidisciplinary team can get your child help;
- Reduce the number of interviews sexually abused children must undergo;
- Provide specialized medical evaluation and treatment;

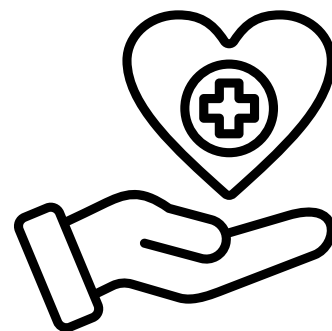
Find a local Child Advocacy Center near you- go to the nationalchildrensalliance.org or call 1-800-239-9950

For Adults Disclosing Past Experiences:

Adults with CSA histories should know that disclosure is *always your choice*: you get to choose if and when you tell, who you tell, and how much you share.

If someone chooses to share about their CSA experiences with you, you should:

- Be calm, patient, and supportive;
- Tell them you believe them and it's not their fault;
- Consider asking them what kind of support they need and offer to help them find support;
- And do not force them to share more than they are comfortable with.



Adults may consider reporting past experiences of sexual abuse to authorities. Deciding whether to report is a personal decision that should be respected. You can view state statutes of limitations [here](#) and reporting support resources [here](#).

We highly recommend adults with histories of sexual abuse seek therapy shown to be effective for people with similar experiences, such as Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.¹⁷⁻¹⁹

General CSA Resources:

- [National Center for Missing & Exploited Children](#)
- [NetSmartz](#): Resource for Online Safety and Preventing Online Child Sexual Exploitation
- If you discover Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) or believe that inappropriate images of your child may be online, report it to [CyberTipline.org](#)
- [Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network \(RAINN\)](#)
- Child Advocacy Centers: nationalchildrensalliance.org
- Crisis textline: Text "LIGHT" to 741741
- Free, confidential support from [Stop It Now!](#)
- [National Traumatic Stress Network Resources on Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- [1in6](#) offers support for male survivors
- Find more [compiled resources](#) from Enough Abuse



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