

generation FIVE's "About Child Sexual Abuse"

<http://www.generationfive.org/csa.php>

What is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is the overarching term for a huge, complicated, personally and socially damaging issue. At the base of child sexual abuse is the sexual use of a child by someone with more power. It is the use of a child to satisfy the offenders own needs for power or sex, disregarding the child's needs and sending a message that the child's wishes about his or her own body are unimportant. 1 in 3 girls and 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused by the time they are 18 years old.

The vast majority of child sexual abuse happens in situations where the child trusts and/or is dependent upon the offender. Over 85% of children know their abusers. Most sexual offenders cultivate some level of trust with the child to assure that they will comply and not tell. The culture of silence and fear around child sexual abuse, combined with the typical responses to trauma and the fact that a child would also have to talk about sex to talk about CSA, leaves the issue rarely addressed within families, our communities and the broader culture.

The general Western definition of child sexual abuse is:

Non-consensual sexual activity that negatively impacts a person's psychological, physical, emotional, social and spiritual self.

- CSA is any sexual violation experienced by someone under the age of eighteen.
- CSA is defined as an abuse of power—someone with more power using it to sexually abuse someone who is younger or under 18 & in a position of less power.
- Developmentally disabled children & adults are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse, and are sexually abused at twice the rate of non-disable children and adults.

Child sexual abuse can include child pornography, sexual exposure/voyeurism, sexual exploitation, genital contact, penetration, sexual jokes, invasive hygienic practices [link to def], and more covert psychological and sexual preoccupations with a child. Importantly, it is not just the sexual behavior, but the combination of the sexual activity with the power imbalance that enables the abuse. Sexual abuse can be coerced or manipulated by many means: from building trust and a "loving relationship" to providing access to materials a child or young person needs or wants, to using force.

Child sexual abuse takes many different forms; incest (sexual abuse within familial relationships), community (CSA within the broader community), stranger molestation, institutional sexual abuse (sexual abuse within institutions- such as the "Indian Schools" set up by the US government; CSA was known to be rampant and a part of debilitating the children and community), commercial sexual abuse (child prostitution), ritual abuse, and systemic sexual abuse (systemic degradation of person's sexuality, i.e. homophobia). The type of child sexual abuse along with other personal and social factors cause increasing degrees of life long impact and trauma.

- Approximately one in three women (30-45 %) and one in six men (13-16 %) report being sexually abused as children.
- The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that over 300,000 children are sexually abused each year in this country.
- Nearly everyone knows someone who has been sexually abused, knows an offender, or has been affected by child sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse can happen between youth, not just adults. Usually this is measured by differences in age (2-5 years), developmental stages, weight and power. Any of these differences can put another child at risk for manipulation and misuse sexually.

While youth can also sexually abuse other children, there is a difference between abuse and age appropriate sexual play amongst child or youth peers. There is often a lot of confusion about this out of a lack of understanding of youth's sexual development and the sex negativity in our communities. People can get paranoid about child sexual abuse on one hand, thinking any sign of sexuality in children or youth is abuse, and then do nothing to prevent CSA on the other. We want to both support age appropriate sexual development in youth, and watch for a potential misuse of power that can harm another child.

When addressing child sexual abuse we also need to address cultural difference, as well as the systemic oppression such as racism, sexism, class access and sexual preference. Each of these interfaces with child sexual abuse and our responses to it. Child sexual abuse is both an individual and a collective crisis requiring social change.

Child Sexual Abuse is a Social Justice Issue

generationFIVE is unique amongst national anti-violence organizations in recognizing that our goal of ending child sexual abuse cannot be realized while other systems of oppression are allowed to continue. In fact, systems of oppression and child sexual abuse have an interdependent relationship: a power-over system that benefits some at the expense of others and uses violence, creates the conditions for child sexual abuse (i.e. gender inequality, class exploitation, racism, violence and threat for difference), while in turn the prevalence of child sexual abuse fosters behaviors (obedience to authority, silence, disempowerment, shame) that prevent people from organizing effectively to work for liberation, healing and change systemic forms of violence.

"Radical simply means grasping things at the root." ~Angela Davis.

Generation FIVE works at the roots of child sexual abuse and holds a vision of liberation, justice and sustainability for all of our futures.

It is estimated that 1 in 3 girls and 1 in six boys is sexually abused before the age of 18. For each of these children, there is an offender and an affected family and community surrounding them. For each circumstance of abuse, there is also a circle of people who can play a part in allowing or preventing abuse.

It is estimated that only 10-20% of CSA gets reported through our public systems. Still, in Public Health terms these numbers are epidemic. This means they are impacting the general population in such high numbers that it is a major public health issue. When we look at the number of children and families affected and the number of offenders, we have to start asking different questions. There are not just a few "bad" people sexually abusing children, the behavior is wide-spread. This is not solely individual mental health issue. We need to ask questions that go beyond the individual to our communities and broader society to find both the causes and solutions to child sexual abuse.

"Imagine a...disease that affects one in five girls and one in seven boys* before they reach 18; a disease that can cause ...severe misconduct disorders among those exposed...can have profound implications for...future health by increasing the risk of problems such as substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases and suicidal behavior; a disease that replicates itself by causing some of its victims to expose future generations...Imagine what we... would do... We would spare no expense. We would invest...in research. We would ...identify those affected and...treat them. We would...broadly implement prevention campaigns to protect our children.

Wouldn't we? Such a disease does exist—it's called child sexual abuse."

James Mercy, M.D., Centers for Disease Control, 1999 *conservative stats based on reported cases of child sexual abuse.

To address child sexual abuse, we need to look at the bigger picture...the social norms in which it is happening. By social norms we mean the beliefs and practices regarding power, sexuality, the ideas about children and ownership, etc. and then the institutions that perpetuate these ideas and practices. We need both an individual and systemic understanding of CSA to be effective in our response and prevention strategies.

Here are some new questions for us to consider:

- What do the high numbers of victim/survivors and offenders of CSA tell us about our family and community beliefs and practices? What do we pass on that lets child sexual abuse continue generation to generation?
- What is it in our social norms and institutions that creates this many offenders, survivors and bystanders to child sexual abuse?
- What are our public systems and institutions missing- so that child sexual abuse rates are not decreasing? What mistakes are we repeating?

We are living in a broader social context that teaches power-over relations, private ownership (parents/family) of children, a dismissal of children's accounts (legal), mixed messages and little education about human sexuality (it is bad, shame based, and it is used to sell us everything from cars to deodorant), and the ongoing mixing of sex and violence. We are not taught to address pain and trauma deeply, but rather mask symptoms or blame the individual for their distress. Child sexual abuse is about having power over another person and using that power sexually. The norms that allow for this behavior are sadly, ever-present in our society.

Generation FIVE looks at these social causes of child sexual abuse and then at real dynamics of the issue...who abuses, who says nothing, the community costs for speaking up, and the criminal justice solutions offered that most people don't find relevant enough to use.

Generation FIVE had a very impactful training by a 26 year veteran of Child Protective Services (CPS), sexual abuse unit. He walked us through the processes of reporting child sexual abuse, the evidentiary laws regarding proof of abuse, the involvement of the criminal legal systems and the sheer number of kids who recant once they think their families will be broken up. He shared that by the end of the process who you have left are poor people and communities of color who could not work their way out of the system....if families have resources, even if CPS highly suspects they are sexually abusing their kids, they can get out of the public systems with self-paid private therapy, and CPS doesn't have the resources to track them.

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