

Child sexual abuse and the church: Impact on adults

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This article is part of a series on child sexual abuse and the church:

- [How widespread is the problem?](#)
- [Impact on children and youth](#)
- [Impact on adults](#)
- [The church's responsibility to protect children](#)
- [Reporting and care after abuse occurs](#)
- [Prevention resources](#)

[Part 1](#) of this series considered the extent of child sexual abuse—how often does sexual abuse of children take place? The vast majority of experts on the matter agree sexual abuse of children is more extensive than most people realize, and, for a variety of reasons, a great deal of child abuse goes unreported.

[Part 2](#) described a set of common indications that a child or teen may have been sexually abused.

How does sexual abuse impact adults?

Impact of sexual abuse on adults

Like children and youth, adults experience a range of affects from childhood sexual abuse. Some individuals work through their abuse and experience minimal current impact. Others are devastated by the abuse and deal with the ramifications of it every day of their adult lives. Still

others grow as a result of the abuse, even becoming advocates or helpers for other victims of abuse.

Researchers Laura Murray, Amanda Nguyen and Judith Cohen point out in their article “Child Sexual Abuse” in the journal *Child and Adolescents Psychiatric Clinics of North America* that adult survivors of sexual abuse can experience health problems, may struggle with drugs and alcohol, face marriage and family relational challenges, and are at increased risk for future sexual victimization and high-risk sexual behaviors.

Commonly, victimized adults have strong feelings of shame, which can lead to feelings of embarrassment and of being exposed. Adult survivors often are quite secretive about their abuse histories, sometimes not even telling siblings, closest friends or spouses.

Adult survivors often struggle to trust others. This struggle to trust can show up in relationships with others who they do not know well and also can occur with loved ones and family members.

Mistrust of others can appear in the form of rigid relational boundaries—not allowing anyone to get very close and keeping others at a safe emotional distance. Thus, some survivors become quite self-sufficient, not allowing anyone to do anything for them.

Lack of trust can also show up in the survivor’s relationship with God. While others seem to trust God easily, adult abuse survivors may find trusting God extremely challenging.

Conversely, other adult survivors seem to function with absent relational boundaries. They trust others unwisely, allow others to invade their emotional and physical space, and have difficulty saying “no.”

Resilience & hope after being sexually abused?

After a number of devastating life circumstances, Joseph became a political and civic leader in Egypt. When he encountered his brothers, who launched his horrific journey by throwing him in a pit and selling him as a slave, Joseph said, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive” (Genesis 50:21, NASB).

Joseph emerged from his abusive past without bitterness, without seeking revenge and seeing a larger purpose God had for his life.

In recent years, childhood experts have begun talking about resilience, or a child’s ability to withstand and grow despite terrible circumstances and tough odds. Despite the potentially devastating effects of sexual abuse, many survivors—children and adults—still grow and thrive.

The phrase Post-Traumatic Growth has emerged recently to describe the result of many trauma survivors, who—as a *result* of their adversity—become strong, healthy and capable of helping others.

Many adult victims face their abuse, go through the process of healing from the wounds, and then turn to help others. These individuals often become powerful agents of healing and advocates for others who have been victimized.

Yes, there is hope—even in the midst of the toughest circumstances.

Upcoming articles

- What is the [responsibility of the church](#) and church leadership to

protect children from abuse, and how can churches do this most effectively?

- *Who must [report abuse, and](#) how can churches help abuse victims and their families?*
- *What [resources are available](#) to churches and families to help prevent abuse and to help the family where abuse has already occurred?*

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