

# Child sexual abuse and the church: Impact on children and youth

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

- [How widespread is the problem?](#)
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- [The church's responsibility to protect children](#)
- [Reporting and care after abuse occurs](#)
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[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.

Sexual abuse is damaging not only to the individual and his or her family but to society at large. While there is no way to calculate the exact cost of sexual abuse, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates a newly substantiated case of nonfatal child maltreatment costs society about [\\$210,000](#) across the child's lifetime.

But what are the other costs? How does sexual abuse effect those who are victimized? How is the impact experienced when one is a child, a teenager and then an adult?

# Variations of the impact of sexual abuse

I am often asked if there is a reliable way to tell if a person has been sexually abused. Can a counselor or a minister interact with an individual and pick up on some specific indicator that the person has been abused?

The answer is, while there are certain indicators that a person might have experienced abuse, there is no single way to know for sure. It is impossible to look at, interact with, or talk with a person and know for certain he or she was abused without the person disclosing the abuse.

Sexual abuse can affect a person in many different ways, ranging from no noticeable effect to a devastating and debilitating impact.

Several factors influence the extent of the impact, including the length of the abuse, the extent of the abuse, the victim's relationship with the abuser, the resilience of the victim, and the amount of pre- and post-abuse support the victim receives.

Because sexual abuse commonly produces shame, individuals often suffer without telling anyone else. In many instances, adults might downplay a child's abuse, perhaps to protect the abuser or to minimize events related to the abuse.

While the effects can be extensive, 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 the outcomes of abuse are not fixed.

According to [Darkness to Light: Child Sexual Abuse Statistics](#): "Although survivors of child sexual abuse are negatively impacted as a whole, it is important to realize that many individual survivors do not suffer these

consequences. Child sexual abuse does not necessarily sentence a victim to an impaired life.”

## **Impact of sexual abuse on children**

Researchers [Richard Gaskill and Bruce Perry](#) note children experience “increasing risk of emotional, behavioral, academic, social and physical problems throughout the child’s lifespan.”

Children may have a sense something is wrong but often do not have the cognitive capacity to understand or the words to communicate what has taken place. Emotionally, children may experience shame, guilt, sadness and anger. Behaviorally, abused children may regress to early stages of functioning, may become clingy with adults or may seem irritable and unsettled.

Many children have some sense that they have done something wrong, and this is likely to be exacerbated if the perpetrator tells them to keep the interaction a secret or tells them the perpetrator will get in trouble if the child tells on him or her.

Children may act out in general, or they may even exhibit sexual behavior that is not age-appropriate. In the extreme, children can develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of the abuse.

## **Impact of sexual abuse on youth**

Teenagers can experience all the same things as do children. Teens may also exhibit signs of stress, depression and anxiety. They may have thoughts of self-harm that include behaviors like cutting, or they may attempt or even complete suicide.

Teens may withdraw from family, other loved ones, and from social

activities such as church involvement. They may engage in various forms of problematic or acting-out behaviors.

Abused teens are more likely to struggle in school—both behaviorally and academically, to be involved with drug and alcohol use, to engage in delinquent behaviors, and to struggle with eating disorders.

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## Upcoming articles

- What is the [\*impact of sexual abuse on adults\*](#), and is there hope?
- 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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