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A few words about how to protect children from sexual abuse

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Sexual abuse is a phenomenon that happens to many children. Based on the results of research, it can be considered that according to current data (2018) – 7%. That is, every 14th child falls victim to some form of abuse before the age of 15.

Caution:

Contrary to the belief of many, in most cases the perpetrators of child sexual abuse are people who are well known to them – such as relatives and family friends, neighbours, coaches, instructors, etc.

Experiencing sexual abuse by a child adversely affects their daily functioning and future.

Children can't stop sexual abusers on their own, and it's difficult for them to disclose hurtful behaviour to others. It is up to us, adults, to know how to act when we suspect a child is being sexually abused.

Caution:

- Child sexual abuse can go on for many years before being revealed
- Most cases of child sexual abuse are never revealed
- 80% of perpetrators of sexual abuse come from an environment familiar to the child

What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse is a sexual activity involving a child, undertaken by a person who has an age, physical or intellectual advantage over the child. The perpetrator of abuse can be an adult or a much older child.

Examples of abusive sexual behaviour towards a child

– with the involvement of physical contact.

- Touching a child's intimate places for the purpose of sexual pleasure.
- Encouraging or forcing a child to touch another person erotically.
- Encouraging or forcing a child to engage in auto-erotic behaviour.
- Engaging in sexual intercourse with a child.

Abusive sexual behaviour towards a child – without engaging in physical contact

- Showing pornographic materials to a child.
- Showing a child theirs or another person's intimate places for the purpose of eroticising them.
- Undressing a child unrelated to the child's care or treatment.
- Photographing a child for the purpose of creating pornographic or erotic images.
- Encouraging a child to watch or listen to sexual acts – either in reality or played out (e.g. from the internet or electronic devices).
- Engaging in conversations of an erotic nature with a child that go beyond sex education.

Remember!

Child sexual abuse is a crime punishable by imprisonment of up to 12 years. Child sexual abuse comprises a variety of prohibited acts indicated in the Polish Criminal Code. Sexual abuse of a child occurs when there is a direct sexual contact between an adult and a child but also when such contact takes place via the Internet. It is also a crime in Poland to possess any erotic materials involving children.

Perpetrators of child sexual abuse

Perpetrators are usually people who are well known to the child from its immediate environment. They are more often men than women. Sometimes they take on the mask of nice, helpful people who have taken a liking to the child and want to help the family take care of it. It also happens that they are violent people who arouse fear in those around them.

The experience of sexual contact with an adult is often a trauma for the child and can affect them throughout its life.



Symptoms and consequences of child sexual abuse

It is very difficult to answer the question: how can one know if a child has become a victim of such a crime?

It should be emphasised that there is no strict set of symptoms observed in a child. The occurrence, severity, number of symptoms depend on many factors such as the age of the child, the child's character traits, the reaction of the environment to the disclosure, the child's previous experience in dealing with stress, the type of relationship with the perpetrator, the possible experience of a threat to life and health.

The only certain indicators of sexual abuse are pregnancy, STDs and the presence of biological material of the perpetrator in the child's orifices or on the child's body.

Other symptoms may or may not be indicative of sexual abuse. Observed distressing behaviours of the child e.g. bedwetting, lowered mood, outbursts of anger and many others may be indicative of abuse, but may also be the result of other difficult experiences of the child such as divorce of parents, death of a family member, atmosphere of conflict or domestic violence.

Warning signals in a child's behaviour that may indicate sexual abuse

- avoids being left alone with a particular person,
- shows unexpected fear of a certain adult or does not want to communicate with him/her,
- tries to talk about abuse using allusions and vague questions; may, for example, mention that someone has asked them to keep a secret, ask anxious questions about a family break-up or talk about their friend's experience of sexual abuse,

- describes the behaviour of an adult, indicating that the adult is trying to get very close to it, spending time with the child outside parental control, contacting the child on social media, showering it with gifts,
- seems depressed and withdrawn; complains of physical ailments that have no medical justification,
- has trouble sleeping,
- has symptoms indicative of abuse – for example, pain in the intimate area,
- has difficulty concentrating, school grades drop,
- behaves aggressively, impulsively, is constantly irritated,
- engages in atypical sexual behaviour – initiates games imitating various forms of sexual intercourse, proposes fondling to others, crossing intimate boundaries.

Sexual abuse, for some victims, causes depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, psychosomatic symptoms, self-harm, suicide attempts, addictions or eating disorders.

It is also important to bear in mind that sometimes the symptoms of abuse may be very discreet, unnoticeable to those around them, may not appear at all or appear later in the child's life.

Long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse

One of the most common long-term effects of childhood abuse is chronic or recurrent depression.

Negative self-perception, low self-esteem or feelings of helplessness are common effects of sexual abuse.

The sense of stigmatisation, of isolation, persists in abuse victims for years. The closer the child was emotionally to the abuser, the greater the isolation.

Victims of childhood sexual abuse may find it difficult in adulthood to feel satisfied with their intimate life, to establish close, lasting relationships or to achieve life goals.



What expressions of sexuality are normal among children?

Sexuality is an integral part of every human being, regardless of age. The following is an incomplete list of manifestations of sexuality that are natural at a certain developmental stage of a child

Period from 3 to 6 years (pre-school period)

Common:

- Questions about the appearance of children in the world, the role of the mother and father in the formation and birth of the child, anatomical differences between boys and girls.
- Strong need for physical closeness, cuddling, kissing.
- Exposure of one's nakedness, no sense of shame in this area.
- Mutual viewing and touching of intimate body parts by children (e.g. playing doctor, dad and mum).

Occurring sometimes:

- Masturbation with and without intimacy.

Period between 7 and 11 years (early school years)

Common:

- The child identifies strongly with his/her own gender. Assimilates social behaviour specific to its own gender.

Occurring sometimes:

- Interest in sexuality (e.g. girls are interested in enlarging breasts, menstrual issues, boys compare the appearance of their genitals, expect their first facial hair). Topics related to psychosexual development, in general, are explored within own gender group.

Period from 12 to 16 years (adolescence)

Common:

- Questions about sexual customs, making relationships-related decisions.
- Masturbation in private places, sexual fantasies.
- Frequent and passing crushes, formation of couples.



Child sexual abuse on the Internet

The development of the Internet has significantly changed the possibilities for communication and increased access to information. At the same time, it has equipped offenders with new forms of access to potential victims.

Children and young people make friends on the Internet, play games and search for answers to mind-boggling questions. In doing so, they are exposed to harmful content, dangerous contacts and cyberbullying.

In many cases, parents are not aware of what their child is doing on the Internet. They do not protect it because they do not realise what kind of dangers it is exposed to.

Dangerous contacts – grooming children on the Internet

The phenomenon of seducing children online, known as **grooming**, is a special relationship created on the internet between an adult and a child for the purpose of seducing and taking advantage of it sexually.

By grooming a child online, the perpetrator may aim to meet the child in the real world and sexually harm it or use it to produce child pornography. Perpetrators of abuse make contact with children through social media, instant messaging linked to online games, blogs, interest groups.

The perpetrator may take on the role of a peer or an older mentor who understands the child, has time for it, and makes the child conflicted with its parents.



The online grooming process is a complex one – the duration, intensity of contact and the way in which it takes place depends on both the personality and needs of the perpetrator and the needs and behaviour of the child.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is the phenomenon of sending or publishing content and materials that are intended to cause harm to another person using the internet and mobile phones.

Often such materials have also sexual content or subtext.

A child, more often a teenager, becomes a victim of deprecation, humiliation online by ridiculing its appearance, undermining its position in its peer group, making hostile comments about his or her sexuality or feelings that were inadvertently revealed. The perpetrators make extreme, unambiguous comments, use vulgarisms and a degrading vocabulary.

Pornographic content

Pornography on the Internet, including child pornography, is an extremely harmful content a child may encounter when engaging in various online activities.

Child pornography is a serious crime. Its production, possession and distribution of such content is illegal under Polish law and punishable by imprisonment.

A dangerous and at the same time very risky for young people phenomenon linked to the use of the Internet is **sexting**.

Sexting is the exchange of multimedia messages containing one's own or one's peers' naked or almost naked photographs.

Remember!

- Agree with your child on the rules for using the Internet
- Only share positive and safe content with your child
- Talk to your child about its experiences online
- Configure security settings on the device
- Install parental control software



Can I keep my child safe?

Teach your child five simple rules:

1

When you say 'no' it means 'no'

2

Alert when you need help

3

You are doing the right thing by telling secrets that someone wants to force on you

4

Remember that your body belongs only to you

5

Intimate parts of your body are especially protected

Most importantly! When teaching your child how to protect itself from the dangers, never forget that you are the one responsible for its safety, not the child itself. Even the best-prepared child may prove defenceless against the cunning adults and the complexity of dangers. Be vigilant about the adults your child interacts with and whether they are spending their time safely.



My child has been sexually abused

Revealing sexual abuse is a difficult and burdening experience for a child. Children who have experienced sexual abuse feel a whole range of feelings – fear, shame, sadness, anger, both towards the perpetrator and themselves, as well as feelings of guilt.

Such children often feel lonely and feel that they cannot reveal to anyone what has happened to them. They love their parents and the people closest to them, but they fear their reactions, they are ashamed, they want to protect them from information that might ruin their lives.

Exposing abuse is particularly difficult when the perpetrator was someone from the child's family. In such situations, an anonymous, sympathetic stranger can help the child overcome these fears and support it in choosing the best strategy to deal with a difficult situation.

Talking to your child about sexual abuse

It is essential to reassure the child that you believe it, are on its side and will do everything to protect and support it. Tell the child that you will not leave it alone, that you will talk to the people who will help you.

It is important to reassure the child that it is not to blame for what has happened, that it's always the perpetrator who is the only one responsible for the abuse.

When I talk about the abuse with my child, am I not hurting it even more?

Do what you can to help the child talk about what has happened to it. Focus all your attention on the child, put down your mobile phone, take a break from other activities. Sit close to your

child, but at a distance so that it does not feel overwhelmed by you. Show patience, do not rush your child, do not throw questions and your doubts at it. Control your emotions. The most important thing now is the child's comfort, not your terror, rage or despair. Give him/her closeness, but do not force physical contact.

When asking your child questions be careful that they are not suggestive, blaming or questioning the child's credibility.

You can start the conversation with the sentence:

'Can you tell me what happened?'

Whatever your child's answer is, remain calm. Encourage it to elaborate by saying:

'Tell me about it.'

'What happened next?'

Remember not to ask your child all the details – it may need more time or be embarrassed or frightened. Your need for a detailed explanation of the situation may become an obstacle in disclosing the abuse.

Don't dramatise but also don't pretend that nothing has happened and that it is best for the child to forget everything as soon as possible. Don't underestimate what the child says, but don't create an atmosphere of great misfortune and suffering.



You can help your child deal with difficult emotions when you reassure it that:

- It's okay that it told you about the abuse,
- you are not angry that it didn't tell you before or that it has already discussed it with someone else,
- you believe it,
- it's not its fault,
- the perpetrator is solely responsible for the abuse,
- it can count on you to be present, to support it, to talk about everything it remembers and feels, what it has experienced, etc.

Be mindful of yourself!

Information disclosed by your child may be difficult for you to accept. You may feel shocked, confused. You may not fully believe in what your child is telling you. Finally, you may think that it is your fault for failing to protect your child from being taken advantage of. If you give in to such thoughts and feelings, you may make it more difficult for your child to talk about the situation and be able to cope with it. Sometimes an inappropriate response from the listener can cause a child to withdraw from disclosing information. Acting under the influence of emotions also makes it difficult to take rational action.

You may feel confused after your child reveals sexual abuse, especially if the perpetrator is a family member. You may need help to cope with the extremely strong, conflicting emotions associated with the revealed abuse, such as shock, anger, disbelief, guilt and fear. Seek professional help by contacting the consultants of the Parent and Teacher Helpline on Child Safety **800 100 100**.

What to do? – first steps

STEP 1: Report abuse

If you are a resident of an Immigration Centre, report the matter to the head of the centre or another member of staff you trust. If you live outside the Centre you can seek help from the counsellor or school psychologist at the school your children attend.

STEP 2: Seek help

You can get help for sexually abused children at the following places:

Children's Aid Centre – Warsaw

Empowering Children Foundation
01-849 Warsaw, ul. Przybyszewskiego 20/24
phone: 22 826 88 62, email: cpd@fdds.pl

Children's Aid Centre – Starogard Gdański

Empowering Children Foundation
83-200 Starogard Gdański, ul. Hallera 19a
phone: 58 531 00 45, e-mail: cpdstarogard@fdds.pl

Parent and Teacher Helpline on Child Safety: 800 100 100

(pon-pt 11:00–15:00, połączenie bezpłatne)

Warsaw Children's Aid Network offices: www.fdds.pl/placowki-wspd

Committee on the Rights of the Child

00-521 Warsaw, ul. Hoża 27A, loc. 5
phone: 22 626 94 19, email: kopd@kopd.pl

Area Committees on the Rights of the Child: <http://kopd.pl/o-kopd/oddzialy/>

Ombudsman for Children

phone: 800 12 12 12 (Mon–Fri, 8:15am–8:00pm, free of charge)

National Emergency Service for Victims of Domestic Violence “Blue Line”

tel: 800 120 002 (24-hour assistance, free call)



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