

Sexual Abuse and Disability

Sexual abuse is not a topic any parent wants to think about in relation to their child. However, awareness of the risk is the first step to prevention of this all too common and often hidden problem. Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is defined as sexual touching and sexual penetration of children. The definition generally includes *attempts* to touch or penetrate the child as well as completed assaults. There are also other forms of illegal or unwanted sexual experiences such as exposure, peeping, or sexual harassment in the form of talking in a sexually inappropriate or intimidating way.

The organization 'Darkness to Light' has compiled these national statistics which apply to ALL children, not just those with disabilities:

- 1 in 4 girls is sexually abused before the age of 18.
- 1 in 6 boys is sexually abused before the age of 18.
- 1 in 5 children are solicited sexually while on the Internet.

Nearly 70% of all reported sexual assaults (including assaults on adults) occur to children ages 17 and under. An estimated 39 million survivors of childhood sexual abuse exist in America today.

Children and youth with a physical and/or intellectual disability are at an *even higher risk* of sexual abuse and exploitation than are non-disabled children (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect). For example, two-thirds or more of women with developmental disabilities will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime (US Department of Justice).

Children and adolescents with physical and/or intellectual disabilities may be more vulnerable because of:

- Dependence on others for intimate care
- Exposure to a large number of caregivers and settings
- Inappropriateness or immaturity in social skills or poor judgment
- Inability to seek help or report abuse
- Lack of strategies to defend themselves against abuse

Claims of abuse by individuals with disabilities are less likely to be reported, acted on by authorities if reported, or to be prosecuted in court. Be aware of how to recognize the signs of abuse and how to report suspected abuse. Make sure your child understands what behaviors are inappropriate and has the correct vocabulary to report what happened if he or she is developmentally capable of doing so.

Individuals convicted of abuse of people with disabilities are often in professions that put them in contact with their potential victims – such as caregivers, bus drivers, therapists, doctors and teachers. They can also be family members or trusted friends or neighbors. While this is frightening information, it should be taken as a reminder to give children and youth as many tools as possible to protect themselves and also to be vigilant and not make assumptions of safety because of the role a person has in your child's life as a caregiver or family member.

What to do?

- Provide information on relationships, sexuality and anatomy and physiology tailored to your child's individual learning abilities
- Teach the right to determine who has permission to touch and where
- Know what constitutes abuse and what to look for.

- Meet the need for a vocabulary to report abuse in a reliable manner
- Know how to make a report and where to get help.

Reporting Abuse in Washington State:

As soon as you have reason to believe that abuse is occurring, *call for help*. You *do not need absolute proof to report suspected abuse*.

To report abuse or neglect of a vulnerable adult or a child in Washington State, call the DSHS toll-free EndHarm hotline anytime day or night at 1-866-363-4276. ENDHARM is TTY accessible. When you call, you will speak with a real person, who will connect you to the direct, local number to make your report.

You can also call directly during business hours:

To report abuse of **vulnerable adults** (age 18 or above) call:

- the Complaint Resolution Unit toll-free hotline at 1-800-562-6078 if the person that you suspect is being abused or neglected is **living in a nursing home, boarding home, or adult family home**.
- the Adult Protective Services (APS) office in your county if the person that you suspect is being abused is **living in their own home or somewhere other than a residential care facility**.
- If it's an emergency and the person is in immediate danger, call the police.

To report abuse of a **child**, call Child Protective Services at 1-800-562-5624.