



Effects of Child Sexual Abuse

Children and adolescents who have been sexually abused can suffer a range of psychological and behavioural problems, from mild to severe, in both the short and long term. These effects vary depending upon the circumstances of the abuse and the child's developmental stage.

The experience of child sexual abuse can change the way children and young people understand their world, the people in it and where they belong. Their understanding of themselves and the world can become distorted, and create mistrust, fear, and betrayal. Depending on the relationship and duration of the sexual harm, subsequent relational trauma could affect their ability to connect with others and themselves. Their personality and behaviours might change markedly from what they were prior to the sexual abuse.

The manipulative nature of grooming that perpetrators use to get close to their victims can cause ongoing thought distortions, self-identity issues, relational harm and isolation of the child.

POTENTIAL SHORT-TERM EFFECTS

- Increased illness, body aches or other physical complaints
- Poor attendance or performance at school
- Difficulty concentrating or memory loss
- Mood changes
- Regressive behaviours
- Sleeping and eating disorders
- Lack of self esteem
- Nightmares
- Self-harm or suicidal thoughts
- Self-hatred or reduced self esteem
- Disinhibited behaviour
- Zoning out or not listening

POTENTIAL LONG-TERM EFFECTS

- Suicidal ideation
- Post-traumatic stress
- Sexual difficulties
- Inability to form lasting relationships
- Identity difficulties
- Relationship problems
- Parenting difficulties
- Alcohol and substance misuse
- The development of violent behaviour
- The development of criminal behaviour

A parent or carer's belief, support and actions to stop the harm after a child's disclosure have an impact on the child's resilience and recovery from the sexual abuse.

If a child is not believed and supported appropriately after a disclosure it can lead to a higher level of relational trauma for the child leading to significantly more negative health and mental health outcomes for the child in the long term.

A systematic meta-review of problems reported by survivors of child sexual abuse found that abuse is associated with many different problems across five primary domains: medical, psychological, sexual, repeated (self-)harm, and other problems. The reported outcomes have been found mostly independent of moderating variables such as frequency of the abuse, relationship to perpetrator and type of control group (Nagtegaal & Boonmann, 2021).

Adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse may experience sexual disturbance or dysfunction, depression, and anxiety. Anxiety, fear, and suicidal ideas and behaviour are more likely in instances where the perpetrator used force and threat of force. The age of onset of the abuse, duration and outcome is characteristic of higher trauma symptom levels. The longer the duration of the abuse is associated with a greater impact on the child's identity, and increased survival mechanisms and the use of force or threat of force are associated with greater harm.

Support is available from several organisations. Bravehearts' Information and Support Line 1800 272 831 can assist you with identifying the most appropriate support services for you.