

# When Teenage Girls Have Been Sexually Abused

A Guide for Teenagers



*"What really  
helps is  
talking to  
someone who  
understands  
Now I don't  
feel so alone."*

## Sexual Abuse Information Series 2008

This is one of ten booklets in the Sexual Abuse Information Series:

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VISAC (Vancouver Incest and Sexual Abuse Centre) is a program of Family Services of Greater Vancouver. VISAC offers a wide range of services including specialized victim support services, individual and group therapy for children, youth, families, and adults who have experienced childhood sexual abuse and/or trauma.

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## When Teenage Girls Have Been Sexually Abused

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**Kids Help Phone 1.800.668.6868**

## Why this booklet?

This booklet is written for teenage girls who have been sexually abused.

You are not alone. One in four girls and one in six boys has been sexually abused by the time they are eighteen. One way of looking at

these numbers is to imagine a classroom of twenty teenagers. Four or five girls and three or four boys in that class will have been sexually abused by the time they leave high school.

You may have been sexually abused by someone in your family, by someone you know or by a stranger. You may have been sexually abused by more than one person.

You may have been abused recently or when you were a little girl.

You may have had an experience that scared or confused you and you might wonder if was sexual abuse.

Whatever your experience, this booklet can help you. It will:

- **define sexual abuse;**
- **outline laws about sex between teenagers and sex between teenagers and adults;**
- **help you understand your feelings about the abuse; and**
- **tell how you can get help – either for yourself or for a friend.**

You can use this booklet by reading it yourself, reading it with a friend or trusted adult, or giving it to a friend who needs help.

The most important thing we can say to teens is "talk about it."

## What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse is an abuse of power. If someone has forced, pressured, or tricked you into sexual activity, that's sexual abuse. When a person takes advantage of you by giving you drugs and/or alcohol in exchange for sexually touching you or when older and more experienced people make teenagers feel they're not "cool" or sophisticated if they don't have sex, that's a form of sexual abuse. If you've been forced to watch sexual acts, movies, or videos, or view pornographic websites or magazines, that's a form of sexual abuse. If someone continually refuses to respect your privacy while you're dressing or when you're in the bathroom, that's another form of sexual abuse.

## What is sexual harassment?

Sexual harassment is a form of sexual abuse. It's sexual attention you didn't want and didn't ask for. If a coach suggests you'll play on the team if you let him kiss you, that's sexual harassment. If a teacher makes sexual comments about your clothing, body, or looks, that's sexual harassment. Sometimes a boss or older employee will make sexual suggestions to teenage girls on the job. Often people who sexually harass pretend they were only teasing, that it was no big deal. They suggest you have no sense of humour. But sexual harassment isn't funny. No one has to put up with humiliating, degrading remarks, looks, and gestures. No one has to pretend it doesn't bother them. Sexual harassment is against the law and you should report it. A women's centre or a sexual assault centre can direct you to the appropriate services and resources.

## Why do we have laws about sex?

There are laws about sexual activity written into the *Criminal Code* of Canada to protect people, especially young people, from exploitation and abuse. The laws recognize that some people are able to dominate and use others simply because they have more power. Some people are stronger, bigger, older, smarter or richer than others. Some, like parents, teachers, babysitters or coaches, may have positions of authority and trust. Others have power because they use weapons. Laws about sex are designed to protect less powerful people from those with more power.

You can use this booklet by reading it with a friend or trusted adult, or by giving it to a friend who needs help.

## What laws should I know about?

All forms of sexual activity with a person below the “age of consent” are illegal under Canada’s *Criminal Code*. The “age of consent” refers to the age at which the law recognizes the legal capacity of a young person to consent to sexual activity. When you do not consent to sexual activity, regardless of age, that is sexual assault. For example, a person cannot “consent” to sexual activity if they are unconscious or impaired by alcohol or drugs.

The age of consent applies to all forms of sexual activity, ranging from sexual touching such as kissing to sexual intercourse.

## What is Canada’s age of consent?

The age of consent is 18 years where the sexual activity is “exploitative” – that is, where it involves pornography, prostitution or occurs within a relationship of authority, trust, or dependency (for example, if it involves a babysitter or teacher) or, where the sexual activity is considered to exploit the young person. Whether a relationship exploits a young person in other ways will depend upon a number of factors, including the age of the young person, the age difference between the young person and the adult, how their relationship developed and the degree of control or influence that the adult has over the young person.

For other types of sexual activity, the age of consent is 16 years. There are three limited exceptions to the “16” year age of consent:

- 12- and 13-year-olds may consent to engage in sexual activity as long as their partner is less than two years older and they are not in an exploitative relationship;
- 14- and 15-year-olds may consent to engage in sexual activity as long as their partner is less than five years older and they are not in an exploitative relationship; and
- 14- and 15-year-olds may consent to engage in sexual activity with a partner who is more than five years older than they are if they are legally married in accordance with provincial or territorial laws.

## What are the actual offences against child sexual abuse and exploitation?

Children are protected under the general sexual offences in the *Criminal Code* that protect all Canadians against sexual abuse and exploitation including, for example, against all forms of sexual assault. (Sexual Assault;

Sexual Assault with a Weapon, Threats to a Third Party or Causing Bodily Harm; and Aggravated Sexual Assault), voyeurism and obscenity.

Children are also protected by child-specific offences in the *Criminal Code* of Canada. These offences include the following:

**Sexual Interference:** no one can touch any part of the body of a child under the age of 16 for a sexual purpose.

**Invitation to Sexual Touching:** no person can invite a child under the age of 16 to touch him/herself or the adult for a sexual purpose.

**Sexual Exploitation:** a person who is in a position of trust or authority over a young person who is 16 or 17 years old (for example, a teacher, religious leader, baby-sitter or doctor) or who the young person is dependent upon, cannot touch any part of the body of the young person for a sexual purpose or invite that young person to touch him/herself or them, for a sexual purpose.

**Incest:** no person may have sexual intercourse with their parent, child, brother, sister, grandparent or grandchild.

**Child Pornography:** no one may make, distribute, transmit, make available, access, sell, advertise, export/import or possess child pornography. Child pornography is broadly defined and includes materials that show someone who is or seems to be under the age of 18 years as being engaged in explicit sexual activity or that shows a sexual organ or anal region of the young person for a sexual purpose.

**Luring a Child:** no person may use a computer system, such as the Internet, to communicate with a young person for the purpose of committing a sexual or abduction offence against that young person. This offence is sometimes called, “Internet luring”.

**Exposure:** no person may expose their genital organs for a sexual purpose to a young person under the age of 16 years.

**Procuring:** it is against the law for parents and guardians to procure their child under the age of 18 years to engage in illegal sexual activity and for anyone to procure or obtain the sexual services of a young person under the age of 18 years (i.e., prostitution).



## Who is sexually abused?

Every year thousands of teenage girls and boys in Canada are sexually abused. Many teenagers were sexually abused when they were still in elementary school or earlier. For many girls, it started at home when they were little. It may have continued for years. If you were sexually abused when you were little, you are vulnerable to being abused again as a teenager. Early experiences of betrayal by someone you depend on makes it hard to learn who to trust and how to stand up for yourself.

## Who are the abusers?

Abusers can be older teenage boys or adult men, older teenage girls or adult women, older adults who pretend to be teenagers on the internet or boys your own age that you date or who are casual friends.

The majority of abusers are male, although both teenage girls and boys can be sexually abused by women. Teenage girls are most often abused by someone in the family or by an older person they know and trust (like a family friend or a person in a position of power or authority). They are sometimes abused by someone their own age; for example, someone they know or are even dating.

A lot of people think that if a man abuses a boy, or a woman abuses a girl, the abuser must be gay or lesbian. That is most often not the case. Gays and lesbians want to be sexual with other adults, not with teenagers.

Abusers are sexual bullies who like to use their power over someone younger, smaller or less powerful than they are, whether they abuse girls, boys or both.

### Marie's story

My older brother started to touch me sexually when I was eight and he was thirteen. At first I liked all the attention and the treats he brought me. As the abuse went on I wanted him to stop but he wouldn't. He threatened to tell our parents I'd done something bad if I told about the abuse. I thought they'd believe him. He finally left home when he was nineteen and the abuse stopped.

When he was gone I thought that was the end of feeling bad. But it wasn't. Everyone I dated treated me like I didn't matter. I kept trying to get them to love me even when I didn't like them. One day I told my best friend about my brother. She told her mom who reported the abuse.

My parents were upset when they found out but now I'm glad they know. A counsellor helped me understand that the abuse wasn't my fault. She helped me see that I deserve to be treated with respect.

If the abuser was nice to you, like Marie's brother was to her, it can be confusing. You begin to believe that a person will be nice to you or love you only if you do what that person wants. You might believe your feelings, thoughts and needs are less important than the other person's. Sometimes you think sex is the price you have to pay for attention.

Everyone deserves to be respected, listened to and cared about. If someone treats you in a way that hurts you, frightens you or makes you angry, in the way Marie's brother did, that's abuse. If they won't stop when you ask, that's abuse too.

When you're not respected or listened to, you may feel bad about yourself. Then, like Marie, you could be abused again.

### Emma's story

I was eight when my mom and dad separated and my brother and I missed my dad a lot. Then, my mom started dating Jim and he moved in. He was really nice at first. He played with us and made me feel special. I asked him to tuck me in at night. Then he started to touch me all over. I felt confused, especially when he touched me in my private parts. I asked him to stop but he didn't listen. He said if I told he'd go away. I didn't want that to happen so I didn't say anything.

I felt trapped. Then, when I was thirteen, a teacher told us about sexual abuse. She said you should tell someone if it's happened to you. I thought about it all week then I told her about Jim. She reported it to the social worker and now Jim can't live with us any more.

If you have been sexually abused you're not alone. It's much more common than you think and it happens to girls and boys.

Abusers are sexual bullies who like to use their power on someone younger, smaller, or less powerful.

My mom cried all the time and my brother was mad at me because Jim wasn't there to play video games with him. I wished I hadn't told anyone. Finally I told my teacher about how awful I felt and she helped our family get counselling. The counsellor helped my brother see that Jim caused all these problems, not me. The counsellor also gave my mom support. That was a relief because I wanted to make her feel better but didn't know how to do it.

Sometimes when a family finds out about the abuse, it seems to cause even more problems. Like Emma you might wish you hadn't told, but you can find support as she did. You could talk to your teacher or counsellor or another family member, like a grandparent. Let them know you and your family need help.

### Emily's story

When I was nine, my babysitter Janet sexually abused me. The way she touched me made me feel good at first. But when I wanted her to stop, she wouldn't. I finally told my mom. She was angry.

She didn't ask Janet to babysit again but she never talked to me about the abuse. I felt really ashamed because I thought she blamed me. Now I'm 13 and sometimes I feel uncomfortable when I'm alone with another girl. It's hard for me to make close friends. I'm afraid that if other girls know about the abuse they'll think I wanted it to happen. They might think I'm a lesbian. I really feel alone.

When kids are abused by someone of the same sex, like Emily was, they often think that means they're gay or lesbian. It doesn't. Whether you grow up to be attracted to men or women has nothing to do with being sexually abused.

If you are confused about your sexual identity, talking to a counsellor can help.

Emily thinks her mom has never talked to her about the abuse because she blames Emily. But it's probably because her mom, like a lot of parents, doesn't know how to talk to her about the abuse.

*It's helpful to find a counsellor who knows about sexual abuse to help you sort out what happened.*

### Lila's story

I met Ben on the internet. He said he was 15 like me. He really listened and was so nice and sympathetic when I told him how unfair my parents were. Later, when he told me he was really 35, I was confused. He was so old but it was so flattering to have someone treat me like a grown-up. I agreed to meet him at a hotel. I was nervous when I got there, but he was so nice and understanding. After kissing and hugging a lot, he asked me to "suck him off" and told me that it wasn't really sex. I didn't know what to do, but I did what he asked. It felt horrible and I got scared when he told me not to tell anyone and asked to meet again at the hotel. I said yes but I didn't go.

It's hard when you are tricked into trading sexual behaviour when what you may really want is attention and affection. It's also hard to sort out whether the person is trustworthy or is using you. That's why it is important to tell someone about what is happening, even if he tells you not to. If he really cared about you, he wouldn't trick you, lie to you (about his age and saying oral sex isn't sex when it is) or ask you to keep a secret like that.

### Why should I tell?

There are four important reasons for telling someone about the abuse:

- 1 To stop the abuse.** Sexual abuse is against the law and you have a right to be protected by the justice system. Police, social workers and judges are all part of a system that has more power than the abuser.
- 2 To help sort out your feelings.** You might want to see a counsellor or join a support group for teenage girls who have been sexually abused. It's a relief to talk to people who understand.

*"The counsellor kept reminding me that I wasn't responsible. After awhile I knew it was true and I felt a lot better."*

**3 To make sure you're physically OK.** You might be worried the abuse has damaged your body in some way, or think you've caught a sexually transmitted disease. You can have a doctor check you out so you know your body's OK.

**4 To stop the abuser from hurting anyone else.**

Sexual abusers often abuse victim after victim until someone stops them.

### What might keep me from telling?

- **You might be afraid.** The abuser might have threatened to hurt you. Or you might think you won't be believed or that you'll be blamed for the abuse. You could be afraid of talking to social workers and police and be afraid of testifying in court because you don't know what to expect. However, there are trained people who can help you through each step.
- **You might be embarrassed** because you think you should have stopped the abuse yourself. If the abuser gave you gifts or special privileges that you liked, you might think you should have seen from the beginning what kind of person the abuser was. It helps to remind yourself you were only a child when it happened and the abuser planned carefully how to get what he wanted.



- **You might not want the abuser to get into trouble** because you still care about him or because you are afraid your family will be mad at you if they can't see him any more or if he goes to jail. Remember you are not responsible for any trouble the abuser gets into – the abuser is responsible.
- If the abuse has stopped, **you might think there's no point making a big deal of it.** But it is a big deal. No one has a right to do what he/she did to you.

- **You might not be sure it was sexual abuse.** If you're confused, it's important to find a counsellor who knows about sexual abuse to help you sort out what happened.

### Who should I tell?

Your parents could be the best people to tell. That will depend on whether or not the abuse happened in your family. It will also depend on how well you get along with your parents. If you think one or both of them will believe you and help you, tell them. If you're not sure, tell another adult you trust. If you're worried that your parents' reactions will be too much for you to handle, tell someone else. Your parents will learn about the abuse in the end, but sometimes it's easier to tell someone outside your family first. That person could be a neighbour, teacher, coach, counsellor, or other trusted adult. If that person doesn't help, tell someone else and keep telling until you have the help you need.

The person you tell must report it to the child protection authorities or the police. You can also phone a crisis support line, the Kids Help Phone (1-800-668-6868), child protection authorities, or the police.

Telling can be scary but once you've told someone, you're not alone. Telling about the abuse gives you a chance to be safe again and to get some support for yourself. Once you tell, you're free from being alone with the secret.

### How do other girls feel when they've been sexually abused?

Here are some common reactions and responses to sexual abuse. These are normal responses to help you with overwhelming events that are not in your control:

#### Disbelief

**"Sometimes I wonder if it really happened. It's so hard to believe my father could do that to me. I almost feel like it happened to someone else."**

Tell someone  
and keep  
telling until  
you have  
the help that  
you need.  
Once you tell,  
you're free  
from  
carrying  
the secret  
any longer.

This reaction is normal. It's a way for your mind to take in what happened without being overwhelmed. If the abuse went on for a long time, you might have told yourself it wasn't really happening in order to survive. If this is true for you, you need time to let it all sink in. Some days you might feel sure about all the details of the abuse and other days you might feel like it never happened at all.

#### Minimization

**"I kept telling myself that what my brother did to me was just sex play between kids. But now I remember crying and begging my mom and dad to take me shopping with them. I didn't want him to babysit me. I know I wouldn't have been that scared if we were really just playing."**

Sometimes when you've been abused you tell yourself it wasn't that bad. This is called "minimization". It's another way of coping with being abused. You think if you tell yourself it wasn't so bad, then you won't feel so hurt, angry or scared.

#### Fear and Anxiety

**"I feel so scared all the time. I keep seeing people who look like the uncle who abused me. Once I saw a van that looked like his and I froze."**

You may be afraid of many things: that it will happen again, that you can't trust anyone, that no one will believe you and/or that you'll be blamed for the abuse.

Whatever your fears, you can figure out what you need to do to feel less afraid. Here are some possibilities: find out from the police or a social worker what you can do if the abuser tries to contact you, begin to see a counsellor or join a support group where you can talk to other girls who've been in the same situation.

#### Sadness

**"Sometimes I miss my dad. Last week was Father's Day and I cried because I didn't have a dad like other kids do. I want a dad who protects me and loves me, not a dad who abused me."**

You might feel sad because things have changed so much. You might wish that everything could be the way it was before the abuse started.

You might also feel sad because you've spent so much time taking care of others and you've never felt taken care of yourself. You might feel you've never had a chance to just be a kid.

You might miss the abuser, especially if he spent time with you and made you feel special. Even though he abused you, he might have been the only person who made you feel important.

You might feel sad because some people in your life aren't close any more. Some might not believe you. Others won't understand what you have been going through. You might feel lonely because you keep your feelings inside or because you think no one wants to listen.

#### Anger

**"My sister and I used to get along but since I told about the abuse, we fight all the time. My grandpa abused me, not her. She's upset that he doesn't live with us any more. It seems like she doesn't care about me. So I take her clothes and things without asking and we get into more fights."**

You'll probably feel angry for a lot of reasons. You'll probably feel angry at the abuser because of what he did; or at your parents because you think they should have known and should have protected you. You might wish social workers, police, and other adults would stop asking you questions when you want to be left alone. You could be angry at friends because they don't seem to understand.

Sometimes you don't know who or what you're mad at. You might yell at a friend when you're really mad at the abuser. If there has been a lot of violence in your family, your own anger might scare you. If you're worried about what you might do when you're angry, a counsellor or someone you trust can help you find safe ways to express it.

*As you learn more about sexual abuse, some of your feelings and behaviour will make more sense to you.*



## Relief

"I always felt crazy and different from other kids. I used to wear layers and layers of clothes, even on the hottest days. My friends used to tease me about it. I feel better now that I understand that I was trying to make myself feel safer."

You'll probably be relieved that the secret is finally out and you don't have to pretend any more. As you learn more about the effects of sexual abuse, some of your feelings and behaviour will make more sense to you.



## Should I go for counselling?

**Yes**, especially if you:

- Feel depressed for days at a time. If you feel like hurting yourself or killing yourself, get help right away! You don't have to keep feeling this way.
- Worry that people are tired of listening to you talk about the abuse and your feelings.
- Wish you'd never told about the abuse. When you feel this way, you

probably need more support. It can help to talk to a counsellor, join a support group or both.

- Have nightmares and feel afraid the abuser could hurt you again.
- Have questions about the abuse but don't know who to ask.
- Start doing things you've never done before. For example, if you start skipping school or having sex.
- Use alcohol or drugs and find yourself in unsafe situations.

"It helped to talk to others who had experiences like mine and who understood how I felt."

- Feel guilty or ashamed about the abuse.
- Worry that you might sexually abuse children. The more you can talk about the abuse and about your fear of abusing others, the less likely you are to abuse anyone. If you have already sexually abused someone, get help immediately.
- Worry about testifying in court. (You can talk to a Victim Services worker whose job is to help you if you are going to court. You can ask the police, social worker or counsellor to help you get the number.)

## What happens in counselling?

"In counselling I thought I'd have to go into all the detail like I did when I talked to the social worker and the police. But I didn't. I talk about things that really bother me, like how my mom keeps telling everyone about the abuse, even though it embarrasses me. Like how hard it is to concentrate at school when court's coming up. Or how sometimes I feel different from other girls because of the abuse."

"I loved the times we did drawings. I drew my nightmares so I could get them out of my system. Another day I made a clay sculpture of the abuser – then smashed it. It helped me get my anger out. My favourite time was when we talked about how to deal with guys who make rude, sexual remarks at school."

## What's a support group?

Some communities have groups for teenage girls who have been sexually abused. Usually a counsellor will help the group become a safe place to talk. It helps to be able to talk to others who've had experiences like yours and who understand how you're feeling.

In a support group, you can talk about anything that's important to you – parents, school, friends, boyfriends, sex, alcohol, and drugs as well as what has happened since you told about the abuse.

Each group is different but they're usually a mixture of talk, fun and other activities.

## Will I ever recover from sexual abuse?

**YES!** Even teens who were abused for years can recover from sexual abuse. You can grow up feeling good about yourself, having fun, having healthy relationships and rewarding work, and being a good mother.

*Yes! Even teens who were abused for years recover from sexual abuse. You can grow up feeling good about yourself, having fun and having healthy relationships.*

The first step in recovering from sexual abuse is to tell someone. The next step is to find people who will support and care about you while you're recovering from the abuse. Many of the things that make you feel bad about yourself are connected to the bad things that happened to you. As you start to understand how the abuse interfered with your growing up, you'll discover wonderful things about yourself that were covered up because of the abuse.

*Additional resources are available at your community resource centre, your local library or the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence.*