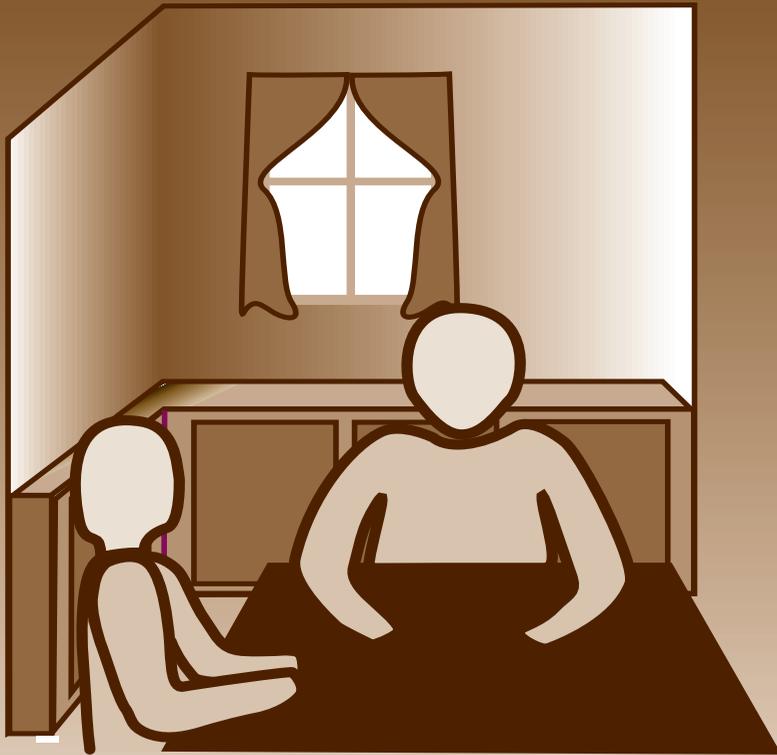


What Parents Need To Know About Child Sexual Abuse



DCF

Department for Children and Families
Family Services Division

Sadly, hundreds of children are sexually abused every year in Vermont.

You can help keep your children safe from sexual abuse with TLC:

- **T**alk with your children.
- **L**earn all you can about the sexual abuse of children, including the warning signs of possible abuse.
- **C**ontact the resources listed in this guide for more information, to report the suspected abuse of a child, or to get help if it happens to your child.

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What Is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse can take many forms, including:

- Touching offenses such as fondling a child's genitals, making a child touch someone else's genitals, attempted penetration, oral sex, and intercourse.
- Non-touching offenses such as exposing one's genitals to a child, watching a child undress for the purpose of sexual gratification, exposing a child to pornography, and arranging for a child to witness adult sexual activity.
- Sexual exploitation offenses such as engaging a child for the purpose of prostitution and photographing a child in sexual poses.

Is It Against The Law?

Yes. All types of child sexual abuse should be reported to the Department for Children and Families (DCF) immediately. Most professionals who work with or around children are required by law to report the suspected abuse of any child under the age of 18 to DCF—within 24 hours.

Who Are The Victims?

All children are potential victims of sexual abuse. It happens to both boys and girls and to children of all ages—from infants to teens. And it happens more often than most people think. Some surveys estimate that as many as one in four girls and one in six boys will experience some form of sexual abuse before their 18th birthday. However, it is difficult to know exactly how often it happens in this country because 1) many cases are not reported and 2) there is no common definition among the states as to what constitutes child sexual abuse.

Vermont's child protection law (33 V.S.A. § 4912) defines child sexual abuse as "... any act or acts by any person [including another child] involving sexual molestation or exploitation of a child including but not limited to incest, prostitution, rape, sodomy, or any lewd and lascivious conduct involving a child. Sexual abuse also includes the aiding, abetting, counseling, hiring, or procuring of a child to perform or participate in any photograph, motion picture, exhibition, show, representation, or other presentation which, in whole or in part, depicts a sexual conduct, sexual excitement or sadomasochistic abuse involving a child."

** A child is defined as an individual under the age of 18.*

Who Are The Abusers?

We often think of them as "dirty old men hiding in the bushes" or "strangers lurking around playgrounds"; the reality, however, is quite different.

The majority of people who sexually abuse children—9 out of 10 in Vermont—are either family members or acquaintances of the child and/or family. They are fathers, mothers, stepparents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, siblings, and cousins. They are friends, neighbors, teachers, babysitters, community leaders, and coaches.

In 90% of the reported cases in Vermont, the abuser is someone the child knows and trusts.

People who sexually abuse children come from all walks of life and from all age, socioeconomic, and educational groups. They include people you would never think could harm a child.

While some women sexually abuse children, most offenders are male. In fact, teenaged boys and men under the age of 40 are responsible for most of the reported cases in Vermont. It's important to note that many men are involved in sexual relationships with adult women during the same time period they are molesting children.

How Does It Happen?

Although each case is different, physical force is not typically used in the sexual abuse of children. In most cases, the abusers have some type of relationship with their victims prior to the sexual abuse. They might:

- Get the children to cooperate by manipulating their feelings of affection, trust, or curiosity.
- Use their relationships with children to create opportunities for sexual abuse. For example, they may begin with what seems like innocent tickling or roughhousing and gradually move on to fondling, intercourse, or other forms of sexual abuse.
- Use threats or bribes to get children to cooperate.
- Take advantage of children's innocence. Some children, especially young ones, don't even understand that they are being hurt.

Do Children Tell?

Too many sexually abused children never tell, and the reasons they don't tell are varied. They might:

- Fear they will be blamed, rejected, or even punished for what happened.
- Think that nobody will believe them.
- Be afraid to tell because they've been threatened. Abusers sometimes talk their victims into keeping the abuse secret by threatening to harm them, their family members, or even a family pet. They might scare children into keeping the abuse secret by telling them that they will be taken away from their parents if they tell.
- Feel ashamed and be too embarrassed to tell.
- Feel responsible for what happened.
- Trust their abusers and not want to betray that trust by telling.
- Enjoy the "special relationships" they have with their abusers and keep quiet to maintain those relationships. Abusers often manipulate children by saying things such as "I won't like you anymore," or "I'll give you...".
- Not understand what happened to them. Some children, especially young ones, don't understand that what happened to them is wrong.
- Not know who to tell or how to talk about it. They may lack the vocabulary to describe what happened.
- Not be understood or believed when they do try to tell someone about it—at least initially. A child's first statement about abuse might be vague and incomplete; he or she may just hint about the problem.

How Can I Help Keep My Children Safe From Abuse?

Talk

- Talk to your children openly and honestly about sex and sexuality; start talking to them early and do it often.
- Let your children know they can talk to you anytime -- and about anything.
- Provide your children with accurate, developmentally-appropriate information; become comfortable using the proper terms for body parts including genitals, and teach them to your children.
- Teach your children to recognize and question inappropriate situations and to trust their own instincts; if it feels wrong, it probably is.
- Teach them that it's okay to say NO when someone does something that makes them feel confused or uncomfortable -- even if it's someone they know and care about. Let them know they should tell you about it immediately, no matter what the person might have said about telling.
- Teach them that they should never keep secrets from you, especially about touching or other situations that make them uncomfortable.

Learn

- Learn the warning signs of possible abuse.
- Pay attention to what is going on with your children; if something doesn't feel right, trust your instincts, and follow up.
- Know who you are allowing into your home, where your children are, and whom your children are spending time with.

Contact

- Contact the resources listed in this booklet to learn more about the sexual abuse of children, how to talk to your children about sex, and the services available to children who are sexually abused.
- Contact your children's schools to ask about the educational programs they offer children on this topic.
- Contact the Department for Children and Families if you suspect your child has been sexually abused and cooperate fully in any investigation that follows.

How Do I Talk To My Children About Sex and Sexuality?

When it comes to talking to their children about sex and sexuality, some parents don't know where to begin or what to say. They may be uncomfortable and embarrassed just talking about it. Some worry that they are telling their children too much or too little. Following are a few resources that can help:

- **Families Are Talking**

<http://www.familiesaretalking.org>

A project of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), this website provides tools to help parents communicate with their children about sexuality-related issues.

- **Planned Parenthood of Northern New England (PPNNE)**

<http://www.ppnne.org/>

PPNNE is the largest reproductive health care and sexuality education provider and advocate in northern New England. Their website offers parents tips for talking to their children about sexuality.

- **Prevent Child Abuse Vermont (PCAV)**

<http://www.pcavt.org/>

Prevent Child Abuse Vermont offers educational workshops and a self-help support group for parents as well as the Vermont Parents' Home Companion and Resource Directory. Contact them at PO Box 829, Montpelier, VT 05601, pcavt@pcavt.org, 1-800-CHILDREN within Vermont, or (802) 229-5724.

- **Talking With Kids About Tough Issues**

<http://www.talkingwithkids.org>

This website is part of a national initiative to encourage parents to talk with their children -- earlier and more often -- about tough issues. It includes advice about talking to children about sex, links to booklets on this and other issues, and links to other resources.

What Are The Warning Signs of Possible Sexual Abuse?

The following signs and symptoms are often seen in children who have been sexually abused. It's important to note, however, that displaying one, or even several, of them does not necessarily mean that a child has been sexually abused. Some of these indicators may show up during other stressful events in a child's life such as divorce or death. If your child displays one or more of the behavioral indicators, pay close attention to what is going on in your child's life and begin asking questions. If you discover any of the physical indicators, consult your child's physician.

Physical Indicators:

- Unexplained bruises, redness, bleeding, or itching in the genital area
- Trauma to breasts, buttocks, lower abdomen, or thighs
- Difficulty walking or sitting
- Frequent urinary tract or yeast infections
- Pain when urinating/ defecating
- Vaginal or penile discharge, presence of a sexually transmitted disease
- Frequent symptoms such as stomachaches and headaches

Behavioral Indicators:

- Acts withdrawn or seems chronically depressed
- Is overly concerned for siblings
- Has problems with peers, resists involvement with peers
- Exhibits hysteria, lack of emotional control
- Has sudden difficulties in school
- Is threatened by physical contact or closeness
- Exhibits inappropriate sexual play with toys or other children, masturbates excessively, displays promiscuity
- Has advanced sexual knowledge or new words for private body parts
- Is suicidal, runs away regularly
- Has an eating disorder, loss of appetite, problems with eating or swallowing
- Has nightmares or other sleep problems, has an intense fear of "monsters"
- Displays sudden and extreme mood swings: rage, fear, anger or withdrawal
- Has a fear or sudden intense dislike of certain people or places
- Displays behaviors typical of younger children such as bed wetting, thumb-sucking, or talking baby talk
- Uses drugs or alcohol, displays self-abusing behavior
- Is secretive, answers "I can't tell you" when asked about secrets
- Talks about a new, significantly older friend, suddenly has money/gifts

What Should I Do If My Child Discloses Sexual Abuse?

Telling someone that you have been sexually abused is extremely difficult. It takes courage. If your child tells you that he/she has been sexually abused:

- 1. Take** what he/she has to say seriously.
- 2. Remain Calm.** Displaying a strong reaction may cause your child to shut down. Be careful not to make negative comments about the abuser since your child likely knows and cares about that person.
- 3. Believe your child.** If your child has been sexually abused, the most important thing you can do is believe what he/she tells you. Children rarely lie or make up stories about sexual abuse. While a child might be a little confused about the details of the abuse, it does not mean that he or she is lying.
- 4. Listen to your child.** Find a quiet, private place to talk. In a calm, matter-of-fact manner, ask your child about what happened. Listen carefully to your child's words and pay particular attention to his or her body language. Start with simple questions such as who, what, where, and when. This will help you gain information without leading your child or placing blame. Never suggest the name of the abuser, even if you feel you know who it is. Always let your child tell you. Choose your questions carefully. Questions that begin with the word why may make your child think he or she did something wrong: Why didn't you tell me about this sooner? Why did you let it happen?
- 5. Provide reassurance and emotional support.** Abused children need to know that no matter what they said or did the abuse was not their fault. They need to know that their parents still love them, are not mad at them, and will do whatever they can to keep the abuse from happening again.
- 6. Write down everything your child said.** Immediately after talking to your child, write down what was said in as much detail as you can remember. Be sure to include any dates your child mentioned as well as the current date. Keep this information in a safe place and add to it should your child choose to talk about it again.

What Do I Do Next?

Report the abuse immediately to the Family Services Division at the Department for Children and Families. DCF is the state agency mandated by law to investigate reports of child abuse and neglect.

Parents sometimes believe that the sexual abuse of their child is a private matter that should be handled within the family. This is a mistake for several reasons:

- By telling, we can help you keep your child safe from further harm and get any services your child needs.
- Sexual abusers typically abuse more than one child. By taking action, you can help make sure it doesn't happen to other children in your community or family.
- Sexual abuse is against the law. By taking action, you can help make sure the abuser is held accountable for his or her actions and gets appropriate treatment.

How Do I Make A Report?

Call or visit your Family Services district office (see the list on the back of this guide) during regular business hours: Monday through Friday, from 7:45 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. After-hours, on weekends, or on state holidays, you can make a report by calling 1-800-649-5285.

A social worker will question you about what happened and record the information you provide. A supervisor will then decide whether to accept your report for investigation. To be accepted, it must allege abuse or neglect as defined by state law.

What If My Report Is Accepted?

Once a report of sexual abuse is accepted for investigation, we will typically interview your child within 72 hours. You will also be interviewed. A police officer may be involved in the interviews.

A social worker will help you to develop a plan to protect your child from further abuse and to identify and access the services your child and family may need. He or she could, for example, refer you to a therapist who helps sexually abused children.

Where Else Can I Get Help If My Child Is Sexually Abused?

When a child discloses sexual abuse, it can be difficult to know where to turn to. The following community agencies can help you and your child.

- **Child First Advocacy Center of Rutland County**

<http://www.childfirstvermont.org/>

Helps families to discover, stop, heal, and prevent child abuse. (802) 775-1580.

- **Chittenden Children's Advocacy Center**

<http://www.vtspecialcrimes.org/>

Provides wrap-around services for children and families who have been impacted by sexual abuse. Contact them for information about on-site group therapy for children, youth, and non-offending family members. 50 Cherry Street, Suite 102 Burlington, VT, 05401, (802) 652-6800.

- **Community Mental Health Centers**

<http://www.ddmhs.state.vt.us/programs/county/county.html>

Each town in Vermont is served by a community mental health agency, which may have a mental health counselor experienced working with children who have been sexually abused. If the agency that serves your area is not able to help you, staff can refer you to a private therapist who can.

- **Family Place Parent Child Center**

www.the-family-place.org

An early education and family support group that serves Windsor County. Their on-site child advocacy center offers therapeutic and support services to child victims of abuse and their families. 319 US Route 5, South Norwich, VT 05055, 1-800-639-0039 toll free, (802) 649-3268, the.family.place@valley.net.

- **Northwest Unit for Special Investigations**

<http://www.angelfire.com/vt/nusi/>

A multi-disciplinary task force that provides services to victims and conducts criminal investigations in response to reports of sexual assaults, child sexual abuse, and other child-related offenses in Franklin County. 45 Kingman St., 3rd Floor, St. Albans, VT 05478, (802) 524-7961.

- **Our House Of Central Vermont**

A child advocacy center that serves Washington County and the towns of Orange, Washington, and Williamstown. They help families to discover, stop, heal, and prevent child sexual abuse. They provide therapy for children, support for parents, and community education. 38 Summer Street Barre, VT, 05641, (802) 476-8852.

- **Safer Society Foundation**

<http://www.saferociety.org/index.html>

A national, non-profit agency that provides services related to the prevention and treatment of sexual abuse. PO Box 340 Brandon, VT 05733-0340, (802) 247-3132.

- **United Way GET INFO**

<http://www.vermont211.org/>

A health and human services information and referral program that can link callers to government programs, community-based organizations, support groups and other resources throughout Vermont. This free and confidential service is available to all Vermonters. Call 1-866-652-4636 toll free in VT, 8:30 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday. You can also access their database on the web.

- **Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services**

<http://www.ccvvs.state.vt.us/>

Their website provides easy access to information for victims of crime in Vermont. You can look up court dockets, search for offender information, find agencies that can help, and much more. 58 South Main Street, Waterbury, VT 05676, info@ccvs.state.vt.us, 1-800-750-1213.

- **Vermont Center for Prevention and Treatment of Sexual Abuse**

An information, training, and resource center for victims, families of victims, and professionals working in the field of sexual abuse. 50 Cherry Street, Suite 101, Burlington, VT 05401, (802) 651-1663.

- **Vermont Network Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault**

<http://www.vtnetwork.org/>

An organization committed to eliminating domestic and sexual violence through advocacy, empowerment and social change. Their website provides links to groups throughout Vermont. PO Box 405, Montpelier VT 05601, (802) 223-1302.
24-hour sexual violence hotline - 1-800-489-7273
24-hours domestic violence hotline - 1-800-228-7395

We hope this guide has helped you to understand:

- *What child sexual abuse is;*
- *How you can help prevent it from happening to your children; and*
- *What to do if it happens to your children.*

If you have any questions please call your Family Services district office or any of the other resources listed in this guide.



Family Services District Offices

Open Monday through Friday, from 7:45am to 4:30pm

BARRE - 479-4260

255 North Main St., Suite 7, Barre, VT 05641-4189

BENNINGTON - 442-8138

200 Veterans Memorial Dr., Suite 14
Bennington, VT 05201-1956

BRATTLEBORO - 257-2888

232 Main Street, 2nd Floor
Brattleboro, VT 05301-2879

BURLINGTON - 863-7370

1193 North Ave, Burlington, VT 05401-2749

HARTFORD - 295-8840

226 Holiday Dr., Ste. 32,
White River Jct., VT 05001-2024

MIDDLEBURY - 388-4660

700 Exchange St., Ste. 105, Middlebury, VT 05753-1529

MORRISVILLE - 888-4576

63 Professional Dr., Suite 3, Morrisville, VT 05661-8522

NEWPORT - 334-6723

100 Main Street, Suite 230, Newport, VT 05855-4898

RUTLAND - 786-5817

220 Asa Bloomer Bldg
88 Merchants Row, Rutland, VT 05701-3449

ST. ALBANS - 527-7741

20 Houghton St., Ste. 211, St. Albans, VT 05478-2247

ST. JOHNSBURY - 748-8374

67 Eastern Ave., Ste. 4, St. Johnsbury, VT 05819-5603

SPRINGFIELD - 885-8900

100 Mineral St., Ste. 101, Springfield, VT 05156-3166

After-hours, on weekends or on state holidays:

call 1-800-649-5285

<http://www.dcf.state.vt.us>