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[What Is Child Sexual Abuse?](#)
[Who Are the Victims?](#)
[Who Are the Perpetrators?](#)
[What Are the Effects?](#)
[Can Children Recover?](#)
[Protecting Children](#)
[What To Do](#)
[Where To Go for Help](#)

Understanding Child Sexual Abuse

Education, Prevention, and Recovery

What are the Effects of Child Sexual Abuse?

Children and adolescents who have been sexually abused can suffer a range of psychological and behavioral problems, from mild to severe, in both the short and long term. These problems typically include depression, anxiety, guilt, fear, sexual dysfunction, withdrawal, and acting out. Depending on the severity of the incident, victims of sexual abuse may also develop fear and anxiety regarding the opposite sex or sexual issues and may display inappropriate sexual behavior. However, the strongest indication that a child has been sexually abused is inappropriate sexual knowledge, sexual interest, and sexual acting out by that child.

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The initial or short-term effects of abuse usually occur within 2 years of the termination of the abuse. These effects vary depending upon the circumstances of the abuse and the child's developmental stage but may include regressive behaviors (such as a return to thumb-sucking or bed-wetting), sleep disturbances, eating problems, behavior and/or performance problems at school, and nonparticipation in school and social activities.

But the negative effects of child sexual abuse can affect the victim for many years and into adulthood. Adults who were sexually abused as children commonly experience depression. Additionally, high levels of anxiety in these adults can result in self-destructive behaviors, such as alcoholism or drug abuse, anxiety attacks, situation-specific anxiety disorders, and insomnia. Many victims also encounter problems in their adult relationships and in their adult sexual functioning.

Revictimization is also a common phenomenon among people abused as children. Research has shown that child sexual abuse victims are more likely to be the victims of rape or to be involved in physically abusive relationships as adults are.

In short, the ill effects of child sexual abuse are wide ranging. There is no one set of symptoms or outcomes that victims experience. Some children even report little or no psychological distress from the abuse, but these children may be either afraid to express their true emotions or may be denying their feelings as a coping mechanism. Other children may have what is called "sleepers effects." They may experience no harm in the short run, but suffer serious problems later in life.

[Can Children Recover From Sexual Abuse?](#) ►

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