

7 Child sexual abuse.  
It doesn't have to happen.

steps  
to protecting  
our children

*from*  
**Darkness**  
*to Light*

A guide for responsible adults





# from Darkness to Light

[www.darkness2light.org](http://www.darkness2light.org)

## What is child sexual abuse?

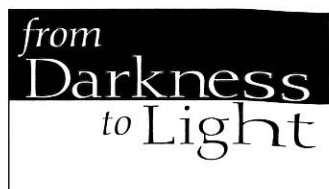
- **Any sexual act between an adult and a minor** or between two minors when one exerts power over the other.
- **Forcing, coercing or persuading a child to engage in any type of sexual act.** This, of course, includes sexual contact. And it also includes non-contact acts such as exhibitionism, exposure to pornography, voyeurism and communicating in a sexual manner by phone or Internet.
- **An agonizing and traumatic experience** for its victims.
- **A crime** punishable by law.

## What is From Darkness to Light?

We are a grassroots national non-profit organization based in Charleston, South Carolina that seeks to protect children from sexual abuse by placing responsibility squarely on adult shoulders. We educate adults to prevent, recognize and react responsibly to child sexual abuse. This booklet is a way for you to begin.

## This booklet is only the beginning.

Child sexual abuse is a very complex problem. And this booklet touches on only a small part of it. The information we provide is not a substitute for the advice of professionals. It is only to give you simple, proactive steps to help protect children.



## From Darkness to Light

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# 7 steps

to preventing, recognizing  
and reacting responsibly  
to child sexual abuse.



“My school has a program to teach children about sexual abuse prevention—but what about adults? Shouldn’t they be more responsible than a six-year-old?”

**A child’s safety is an adult’s job.** Children are often taught how to keep themselves safe from sexual abuse — and that’s important for them to learn — but that’s no substitute for adult responsibility. We make sure our children wear seat belts. We walk them across busy streets. We store toxic household cleaners out of reach. Why, then, would we leave the job of preventing child sexual abuse solely to children?

**Imagine how difficult it is for a child to say “no” to a coach.**

**Even the most trusted adults can’t always be trusted.** Coaches, teachers and parents are authority figures children feel they can trust. Yet, a large percentage of those who sexually abuse children come from this group. These are adults who have the opportunity to “groom” children with affection and attention, making it difficult for children to identify certain attention as abuse. And they know that children have been taught to “mind” them. This is why child-focused prevention programs must be supplemented with programs that focus on adult responsibility.



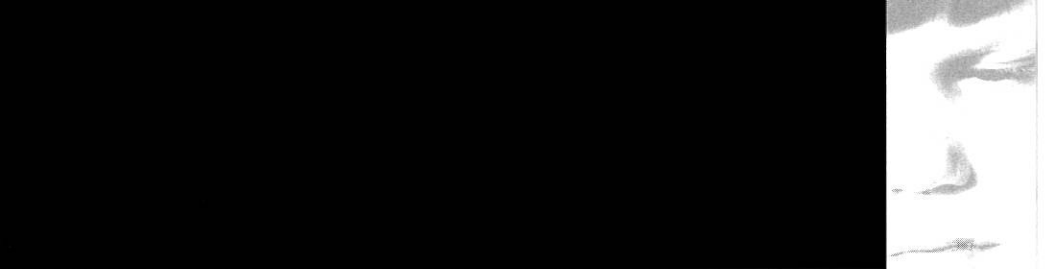
# Step 1

Learn the facts and understand the risks. Realities—not trust—should influence your decisions regarding your child.

**“We live in a beautiful, safe neighborhood. None of these children could be suffering from sexual abuse, right?”**

**It is highly likely that you know a child who has been or is being abused.**

- Experts estimate that one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before their eighteenth birthday. This means that in any classroom or neighborhood full of children, there are children who are silently bearing the burden of sexual abuse.
- 67% of all reported sexual assaults (including assaults on adults) occur to children ages 17 and under.
- The median age for reported sexual abuse is nine years old.
- 22% of the victims of sexual abuse are under eight.
- 50% of all victims of forcible sodomy, sexual assault with an object, and forcible fondling are under twelve.
- Only one in ten child victims reports the abuse.
- Sexually abused children who keep it a secret or who “tell” and are not believed are at far greater risk than the general population for psychological, emotional, social and physical problems often lasting into adulthood.



**And it is also likely that you know an abuser.  
The greatest risk to our children doesn't come from strangers  
but from our friends and family.**

- 34% of victims are abused by family members.
- A further 59% are abused by people the family trusts—abusers frequently try to form a trusting relationship with parents.
- A large number are abused by older or larger children.
- People who abuse children look and act just like everyone else. In fact, they often go out of their way to appear trustworthy to gain access to children.
- Those who sexually abuse children are drawn to settings where they can gain easy access to children, such as sports leagues, faith centers, clubs and schools.

**“It can't happen in  
my family. I could  
tell if someone I  
know is an abuser.”**

Yet 93% of all victims  
know their abusers.



# Step 2

Minimize opportunity.

If you eliminate or reduce one-adult/one-child situations, you'll dramatically lower the risk of sexual abuse for your child.

## **More than 80% of sexual abuse cases happen in one-adult/one-child situations.**

### **Reduce the risk.**

- Understand that abusers often become friendly with potential victims and their families, enjoying family activities and earning family trust.
- Avoid placing your child alone with one adult. Look for group situations instead.
- Lobby for policies limiting one-adult/one-child situations in all youth-related activities such as faith groups, sports teams, and school clubs. Make sure parents can interrupt or observe activities at any time and that background checks are done on people working directly with children.
- Insist that these groups train their staff to prevent, recognize and react responsibly to child sexual abuse.
- Drop in unexpectedly when your child is alone with any adult.
- Monitor your child's Internet use, as this is how pedophiles often interact privately with children, with the goal of luring them into physical contact.
- Set an example by personally avoiding one-adult/one-child situations with children other than your own.

# Step 3

Talk about it.

Children often keep abuse a secret, but barriers can be broken down by talking openly about it.



**“My daughter tells me everything. I know she would tell me if someone molested her.”**

## **Understand why children won't “tell”**

- Children are afraid of disappointing their parents.
- Children are afraid of disrupting the family.
- The abuser sometimes threatens the child or a family member.
- The abuser shames the child, points out that she let it happen, or tells her that her parents will be angry.
- Some children who did not initially disclose abuse are afraid or ashamed to tell when it happens again.
- Some children are too young to understand. Many abusers tell children the abuse is “okay” or a “game.”

## **Know how children communicate.**

- Children who do disclose sexual abuse often tell a trusted adult other than a parent. For this reason, training for people who work with children is especially important.
- Children may tell “parts” of what happened or pretend it happened to someone else to gauge adult reaction.
- Children will often “shut down” and refuse to tell more if you respond emotionally or negatively.
- If your child does not talk to you, don't think it's a sign of poor parenting.



## **Talk openly with your child.**

Good communication may decrease your child's vulnerability to sexual abuse and increase the likelihood that he will tell you if he is sexually abused.

- Teach your child that it is your job to protect him.
- Teach your child that it is not her responsibility to protect others.
- Demonstrate daily that you will not be angry, no matter what your child tells you about any aspect of his life.
- Listen quietly. Children have a hard time telling parents about troubling events.
- Teach your child about her body, about what abuse is and, as age-appropriate, about sex. Teach her words that help her discuss sex comfortably with you.
- Teach your child that it is against the "rules" for adults to act in a sexual way with children and use examples.
- Start early and talk often. Use everyday opportunities to talk about sexual abuse.

## **One survey showed that only 29% of parents ever mentioned or discussed sexual abuse with their children.**

*And even then, most failed to mention that the abuser might be an adult friend or family member. Plus the discussions often occurred too late—almost 25% of sexual abuse cases occur before the child is nine years of age.*



# Step 4

Stay alert.

Don't expect obvious signs when a child is being sexually abused. Signs are often there but you've got to spot them.



**“Is my son’s withdrawal due to pre-teen angst or is he being sexually abused?”**

## Learn the signs.

- Physical signs of sexual abuse are not common, although redness, rashes or swelling in the genital area, urinary tract infections or other such symptoms should be carefully investigated. Also, physical problems associated with anxiety, such as chronic stomach pain or headaches, may occur.
- Emotional or behavioral signals are more common. These can run from “too perfect” behavior, to withdrawal and depression, to unexplained anger and rebellion.
- Sexual behavior and language that are not age-appropriate can be a red flag.
- Be aware that in some children there are no signs whatsoever.

**If you find physical signs that you suspect as sexual abuse, have the child physically examined immediately by a professional who specializes in child sexual abuse.**

A child advocacy center can guide you. To find a center near you contact National Children's Alliance at [www.nca-online.org/members.html](http://www.nca-online.org/members.html) or call 1-800-239-9950. The opportunity to convict a child molester may depend on forensic evidence from an examination.



# Step 5

Make a plan.

Learn where to go, who to call  
and how to react.

“My 11-year-old daughter said my husband, her stepfather, sneaks into her room at night. Then she said she made the whole thing up. Now she won’t say anything. I don’t know what to do.”

## **Don’t overreact.**

If your child breaks an arm or runs a high fever, you know to stay calm and where to seek help because you’ve mentally prepared yourself. Reacting to child sexual abuse is the same. Your reactions have a powerful influence on vulnerable children.

When you react to disclosure with anger or disbelief, the response is often:

- The child shuts down.
- The child changes his story in the face of your anger and disbelief, when, in fact, abuse may actually be occurring.
- The child changes his account around your questions so future tellings appear to be “coached.” This can be very harmful if the case goes to court.
- The child feels even more guilty.

**Very few reported incidents are false.**



### **Offer support.**

If you think through your emotional response before you even suspect abuse, you'll be able to respond in a much more supportive manner.

- Believe the child and make sure he knows it.
- Don't ask questions. You'll just confuse and upset her. This may make it harder to protect her and could damage criminal prosecution of the offender.
- Assure the child that it's your job to protect him and that you'll do everything you can for him.
- Report or take action in all cases of suspected abuse, both inside and outside the immediate family. The safety of a child is far more important than any emotional conflict you may have to face.
- Don't panic. Sexually abused children who receive psychological help can and do heal.

**By reacting appropriately  
to child sexual abuse,  
you will save not only the one child,  
but countless others.**

**Because many of those who sexually  
abuse children have multiple victims.**



## Child sexual abuse is a crime. Know where to go for help.

Do you know where you would go to get help if your child was sexually abused? Do you know what agencies would be involved, or whether you would need to call the police? Finding out these answers ahead of time can make a tremendous difference in how your child's case is handled if he ever is sexually abused.

**Legal requirements for reporting:** All 50 states require that **professionals** who work with children report reasonable suspicions of child abuse; some states require that **anyone** with suspicions report it; and all states will accept reports of abuse from anyone who suspects it. Information about each state's requirements is available at [www.darkness2light.org](http://www.darkness2light.org).

**Agencies that accept reports of child abuse:** The two agencies that handle most reports of child abuse are Child Protective Services (in some states this agency has a different name) and the police. Child Protective Services become involved when the suspected abuser has continuing access to the child. The police may also be involved in these cases. If the suspected abuser does not have continuing access to the child, the police will handle the case. If you are unsure of the person behind the abuse but want to report suspicions officially, call the police.

### **Other agencies that can help victims of child abuse:**

- **Child advocacy centers** can make the entire process of reporting, assessing and getting treatment much less traumatic for children. They coordinate all the professionals (legal and social services) involved in a case. If you're unsure about whether to make an official report or just need support or information, contact a child advocacy center. To find one near you, visit the website of National Children's Alliance at [www.nca-online.org](http://www.nca-online.org) or call 1-800-239-9950.
- **Local community agencies** can help with legal concerns and treatment for child victims and adult survivors. Contact a local hotline, United Way office, rape crisis center or child advocacy center for information on services in your area.
- **If the legal system does not provide adequate protection** for a child, call Justice for Children ([www.jfcadvocacy.org](http://www.jfcadvocacy.org) or 713-225-4357).

# Step 6

Act on suspicions.

The future wellbeing of a child is at stake.



**“There’s a child in my neighborhood who I suspect is being abused. What should I do?”**

You may be faced with a situation where you suspect abuse, but don’t have any proof. You may be reluctant to make an official report on gut feeling alone. You should know that your gut feeling is usually right. And why take chances when a child’s safety is concerned? If you suspect abuse but don’t think you have enough information to make an official report, you can:

- Call a child advocacy center or other professional organization. These people can help you evaluate your suspicions and can provide help and information.
- Talk to the child’s parent (as long as he/she is not the one abusing the child) and provide educational materials on the subject, such as this booklet. If he/she seems indifferent or takes no action, you may need to contact the police or Child Protective Services (see Step 5).
- **Important numbers to know:**

### **Child advocacy centers:**

To find one near you, go to [www.nca-online.org/members.html](http://www.nca-online.org/members.html) or call 1-800-239-9950. In lieu of a child advocacy center, rape crisis centers or mental health providers can often help.

### **Child abuse hotlines:**

From Darkness to Light (1-866-FOR-LIGHT or 1-866-367-5444); 211 — a new Social Services Emergency number being offered in certain areas; and Childhelp USA National Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-4-A-CHILD or 1-800-422-4453).

These resources can help you if you are unsure of whether abuse has occurred, but they do not substitute for making an official report. You may still need to do this. Refer to the “Know where to go for help” section in Step 5 for information on making an official report.



# Step 7

Get involved.

**Volunteer and financially support organizations such as these, which fight the tragedy of child sexual abuse:**

- Prevention programs
- Child advocacy centers
- Crisis information and referral services
- Rape crisis centers

**Use your voice and your vote to make your community a safer place for children.**

- Support legislation that protects children.  
Visit [www.darkness2light.org](http://www.darkness2light.org) for legislative information.
- Demand that government puts more resources into the fight against child sexual abuse.
- Call and write your members of Congress.
- Write letters to your newspaper.

### **Break the cycle of silence.**

If child sexual abuse is part of your history, do not keep silent. By breaking the cycle of silence, you will break free from the trauma you carry within you and begin an important healing process. And you will help protect other children from suffering the way you did.

**There are 40 million survivors  
of child sexual abuse  
in America today.**

Let the prevention and the healing begin.



Sources of all statistics used in this publication are available in the Shocking Statistics portion of the From Darkness to Light website, [www.darkness2light.org](http://www.darkness2light.org).

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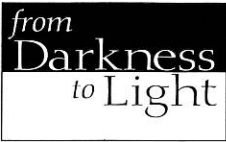
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**From Darkness to Light**  
**247 Meeting Street**  
**Charleston, SC 29401**



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I have enclosed a check.

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