

Child Sexual Abuse

Scope of the Problem:

According to the Florida Department of Children and Families, there are more than 10,000 calls annually to the child abuse hotline in Palm Beach County. Of those reports, more than 1200 are child sexual abuse in nature and more than 360 are substantiated. While these statistics alone are alarming, even more frightening is the reality that many child sexual abuse cases are never even reported. Perpetrators use intimidation and threat tactics so that child victims are scared to tell. Keeping secrets is, in fact, one of the most common factors found in working with sexual abuse cases.

Even more challenging is that sexual abuse cases that are reported are oftentimes difficult to prove and become the child's word against the adult's word. Yet the reality is that children rarely lie about abuse and should *always* be believed. Not only do perpetrators target vulnerable children, but they use "grooming" tactics to lure the child. This may include buying the child gifts and toys or taking them to special places. Offending behavior may begin with things like lingering hugs and then progress to much more serious offenses. This often makes the child feel extremely confused.

Another issue of growing concern in our community is the increasing number of child-on-child sexual abuse cases. In the most recent year, DCF reports indicate as many as 11% of sexual abuse calls to the hotline were of this nature. There are many factors that contribute to this problem including poor adult supervision. While the common theory is that children who sexually abuse other children were sexually abused themselves, in the vast majority of cases, they actually come from homes characterized by parental neglect or violence between caregivers.

Child sexual abuse is defined as penetration of the anus/genitals; sexual contact of the anus/genitals by mouth or tongue; intrusion into the genitals or anus with an object; intentional touching of genitals, intimate parts, or the clothing covering them that is not otherwise part of normal caregiver responsibility or medical purposes; intentional masturbation of genitals in the presence of a child; intentional exposure of the genitals for purpose of sexual arousal; and sexual exploitation.

The impact of sexual abuse can be profound. Emotional and behavioral symptoms can affect the child at a very young age, extending well into adulthood especially if not treated. Symptoms may wreak havoc on personal relationships and interfere with school and/or work. Symptoms may include anxiety or depression, shame and guilt, confusion, aggression and anger, fearfulness, nightmares, difficulty eating or sleeping, regressive behaviors, and bedwetting or soiling the bed or clothing.

Studies show that without intervention, children who are victimized by abuse oftentimes run the risk of further re-victimization throughout their lifetime. Without the necessary skills to recognize abuse, be aware of personal boundaries, and know what to do when someone is not respecting those boundaries, children may unwittingly be putting themselves at risk over and over again.

What are our community's challenges?

(This list is certainly not exhaustive)

- Sexual abuse often passes from generation to generation. It is common for child victims to come from families where the parents were sexually abused as children themselves. Without intervention to end this cycle of abuse, we are not likely to see a decrease in this problem over time.
- Professionals are often inadequately trained to recognize or intervene on pertinent sexual abuse issues.
- Lack of funding for sexual abuse resources results in minimal treatment and placement alternatives.
- We have an overwhelmed foster care system that oftentimes re-victimizes children by putting them at risk for further abuses.
- Children who do not disclose and/or are not provided intervention may end up costing society even more down the road, as their symptoms increase in intensity over time and surface in substance/drug abuse, mental health problems, and medical illnesses.
- Insurance/Medicaid does not sufficiently cover the cost of interventions.

What can I do?

- ✓ Be aware of the sexual abuse problem in our community.
- ✓ Be knowledgeable about the laws and statutes that govern child abuse. Civil Statutes are governed by Chapter 39 and Criminal Statutes Chapter 827.
- ✓ Be aware of signs and symptoms. If you suspect that a child is being or has been abused contact the abuse hotline at 1-800-96-ABUSE or dial 911.
- ✓ If you know that a child has been abused, refer them to a qualified professional.
- ✓ Get involved in local, state, or national initiatives to protect children from predators and to fund programs that provide services for this population.

Important Websites:

Laws and definitions:

<http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/as/reporting.shtml>

http://www.teen-aid.org/State_Resources/Florida.htm

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/>

Sex Offender Registry:

<http://offender.fdle.state.fl.us/offender/homepage>

Access to Sexual Abuse Treatment Providers in Florida:

<http://www.doh.state.fl.us/cms/HProviderPISATP.html>

General Information:

www.prevent-abuse-now.com

www.stopitnow.com

www.hope4families.com

www.safersociety.org

Community Resources:

211

- ❖ Palm Beach County's Information and Referral Line
- ❖ Can link you with multiple resources in Palm Beach that focus on sexual abuse treatment, intervention, and support

S.A.F.E. Kids Program – The Center for Family Services

Stop Abuse by Family Empowerment

4101 Parker Avenue, West Palm Beach, FL 33405

561-616-1337

- ❖ The only Sexual Abuse Treatment Provider (SATP) in Palm Beach County
- ❖ Specializes in therapy for victims of sexual abuse, their siblings and caregivers
- ❖ Most services are free

Kids in Distress

1845 Federal Highway, Delray Beach, FL 33483

561-272-0204

- ❖ Works with families where there is a high risk for out-of-home placement
- ❖ The goal is to keep children and families safe in their home and avoid out-of-home placement