**What are the effects of child sexual assault?**

Child sexual assault can have a number of effects, both physical and psychological, that last both in the short and longer term. Early identification and effective intervention can ameliorate the initial effects and long-term consequences of child sexual abuse and promote the recovery of victims.

Outlined below are some common effects which can occur as a result of childhood sexual assault.

**Psychological effects**

* **Fear**. The offender may swear the child to secrecy and say something bad will happen if they tell. Coercion, bribery or threats usually accompany sexual abuse. Overwhelmingly, the child is afraid to tell because of what the consequences might be. e.g. punishment, blame, not being believed and ultimate rejection or abandonment.
* **Helplessness/powerlessness**. Children in this situation often feel that they have no control over their own lives or even over their own bodies. They feel that they have no choices available to them.
* **Guilt and Shame**. The child knows something is wrong, but blames him or herself not others. The offender will often encourage the child to feel that the abuse is his or her fault and as a consequence is a "bad" person.
* **Responsibility**. The offender coerces the child to feel responsible for concealing the abuse. The child then believes they are responsible for preserving the secret in order to keep their family together and to maintain appearances at all costs. The burden of this responsibility, however, interferes with all normal childhood development and experiences.
* **Isolation**. Incest victims feel different from other children. They must usually be secretive. This further isolates them from non-offending parents and brothers and sisters. This isolation often leads to the child being labelled as 'different', 'a problem', or in some way different from their siblings.
* **Betrayal**. Children feel betrayed because they are dependent upon adults for nurturing and protection and the offender is someone who they should be able to love and trust. They may also feel betrayed by a non-offending parent who they believe has failed to protect them.
* **Anger**. Children most often direct their feelings of anger in several ways.
  1. They may direct it outward at perceived 'little things'.
  2. They may more often direct it inward affirming their feelings of low self worth or value; and
  3. Almost never direct their anger towards the abuser whilst still in close relationship with them. The issue of anger is most often dealt with in the longer term, as an adult.
  4. Children may feel anger towards others whom they believe have failed to protect them.
* **Sadness**. Children may feel grief due to a sense of loss, especially if the perpetrator was loved and trusted by the child.
* **Flashbacks**. These can be like nightmares which happen while the child is awake. They are a re-experience of the sexual assault as it occurred at that time. As an adult, a survivor may experience the same type of omnipotent fear that they experienced as a child. Flashbacks can be triggered by many things. By a smell, a mannerism, a phrase, a place or a wealth of other environmental factors that may have significance.

Other short term impacts may include:

* Medical problems, such as Sexually Transmitted Infections, pregnancy or physical injuries;
* Behavioural problems such as aggression, clinginess, phobias, eating and sleeping disorders, school problems and school refusal.

**In the long term the child may also experience a number of effects as an adult**

These may include:

* Depression, anxiety, trouble sleeping;
* Low self esteem;
* "Damaged goods" syndrome. i.e. negative body image due to self-blame. This may be intensified if physical pain was experienced during the abusive incidents;
* Vulnerability to subsequent abuse and exploitation;
* Dissociation from feeling;
* Social isolation;
* Relationship problems such as an inability to trust, poor social skills or a reluctance to disclose details about themselves;
* Self destructive behaviour such as substance abuse or suicide attempts;
* Eating disorders;
* Sexual difficulties such as fear of sex or intimacy, indiscriminate multiple sex partners or difficulty in reaching orgasm;
* Parenting problems such as fear of being a bad parent, or fear of abusing the child or being overprotective;
* An underlying sense of guilt, anger or loss;
* "Flashbacks" and/or panic attacks;
* Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.