



Safe Environment Tips for Parents and Caregivers 2022-2023

Busting Common Child Abuse Myths

When it comes to reporting suspected child abuse the many myths about abuse may cause caring adults to miss a sign of child abuse. Below are some of the common myths and the myth-busting facts surrounding child sexual abuse and the age of consent in Pennsylvania. Known or suspected child abuse, sexual or other type, can be reported by anyone by calling ChildLine at 1-800-932-0313. ChildLine is operated 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Myth: *Children lie about being abused, often for attention*

Fact: Statistics show that only 4%-8% of reports of abuse made by children are false or fabricated. Or, in other words, between 92 and 96% of reports are true. That's a lot! If a child is willing to come forward, it's rare that they're lying. "Disclosure" the term for telling someone about your experience of abuse, is never easy for survivors. Kids rarely disclose abuse for attention or to get someone in trouble, if a child discloses to you, it means they trust you to help and protect them. How you handle this situation can change that child's life.

Myth: *Child sexual abuse doesn't happen in "good" communities*

Fact: It doesn't matter what kind of neighborhood, town, or community you're a part of – children everywhere are at risk of abuse. This is not because of their location, but because there exist adults who look for that opportunity. Abusers come from any variety of different socio-economic backgrounds, races, religious affiliations, and educational statuses. While children in rural or lower income communities report a high rate of abuse, children from every demographic can be affected. Perpetrators are often loved and respected community members; there's no single "profile" for an abuser, which means we must be equally protective of all children.

Myth: *Children are sexually abused by strangers or unknown adults*

Fact: Perpetrators are not waiting on the street to snatch kids; only 10% of sexually abused children are abused by a stranger. The other 90% of survivors are abused by someone they (or their family) know and trust. Perpetrators integrate themselves into everyone's life, not just the child's. They build relationships with the caregivers, family, and friends so that they are trusted to be alone with the child. Gaining access this way gives them many more opportunities to perpetrate. This is a process called grooming.

Myth: *Children are only at risk of sexual abuse from men who are pedophiles*

Fact: Not everyone who sexually abuses children is a pedophile, or a man. Women and peer youth can also offend. Pedophilic offenders often start offending at an early age and often have many victims (frequently non-family members). However, child sexual abuse is perpetrated by a wide range of individuals with diverse motivations.

Myth: *Child sexual abuse happens mostly to girls*

Fact: While it's true that females are up to five times more likely to be abused than males, boys are still at risk. Boys are much less likely to come forward with allegations of abuse due to stigma and shame, so reporting rates are much lower for this demographic. This artificially adjusts the numbers to seem like boys are abused less than girls.

Myth: *Child sexual abuse can cause a child to identify as "gay"*

Fact: A child's sexual orientation and/or gender identity are neither the cause or result of abuse. Sexual abuse has many long-term effects on a child's life and health, but there is no evidence that suggests it plays a role in their sexual orientation. It is proven, however, that children who experience abuse have a greater risk of mental illness, behavioral problems, lower performance in school, delinquency and substance abuse in later life, and re-victimization.

Myth: *16-year-olds can consent to have sex with adults*

Fact: TV shows and social media often sexualize teenagers and romanticize situations that in the "real world" would be considered sexual abuse and assault. Abuse always involves a power dynamic, in which one more powerful person (often an older person) exerts themselves over the less powerful (or younger). Make it a point to have conversations with the teenagers in your life about consent, body boundaries, and safety.

Understanding the Age of Consent in Pennsylvania

PA recognizes that age and experience create a power imbalance that can make it impossible for the younger person to give consent.

- Children less than 13 years of age cannot give consent to sexual activity.
- Teens between the ages of 13-15 cannot consent to sexual activity with anyone who is four or more years old than them.
- People ages 16 years and older can legally consent to sexual activity as long as the other person does not have authority over them as defined in Pennsylvania's institutional sexual assault statute.

Statutory Sexual Assault

It is considered a felony statutory sexual assault when:

- One person is 13 and the other is 17 or older
- One person is 14 and the other is 18 or older
- One person is 15 and the other is 19 or older