

Myths and Stereotypes

As a society, it is taking a long time for us to come to terms with the existence and prevalence of sexual abuse in childhood. It can be psychologically disturbing to allow ourselves to know the extent to which abuse happens and the range of abusive behaviour that is inflicted on children and vulnerable adults. It can sometimes feel unbearable to face the truth. Myths and stereotypes can give us a sense of safety and a belief that we can protect our children from any harm; but it is a sense of security borne of falsehoods. Anything which distorts the reality of abuse only serves to reduce safety for children, increase safety for those who abuse them and exacerbate the pain and distress experienced by those who survive abuse.

Here is a list of common myths about childhood sexual abuse; it is by no means a complete list, but reading through it may help you to understand other myths or misconceptions when you come across them.

- **Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) only happens in dysfunctional families**

Now, while any family where abuse is happening could be described as dysfunctional in an important way, this is a myth in that it suggests that sexual abuse only happens in certain types of families, perhaps families where other abuse is already taking place, where relationships have broken down in some way or where there are complex needs due to disadvantage or deprivation. There is an undercurrent here relating to social class and is reminiscent of the old myths that domestic abuse only happened in working class communities, which of course is not true. The reality is that sexual abuse happens in all kinds of families and across all cultures. It happens in families that are experiencing complex difficulties but also in families where everything appears on the surface to be functioning well and where relationships appear caring.

- **Child sexual abusers are monsters or mentally ill**

While you may hold strong judgements about people who abuse children, this statement detracts from the real truth. This myth relates to the stereotype that often appears in news coverage of abuse. People who abuse are frequently portrayed as paedophiles, loners, people on the edge of society who are mentally unstable etc. We may feel safer if we believe this myth because we think that we would be able to recognise an abuser. While there may be individuals who match the description above, we now know that the majority of those who abuse do not fit this profile. More often than not, they are people (men and women) who we would perceive as being very ordinary members of society. Abusers come from all sections of society and may be a shopkeeper, a police officer, a sports instructor, a teacher, a member of the clergy, a next-door-neighbour, a doctor etc. An abuser will have a family and may be embedded in community life; in such a way that nothing appears out of the ordinary.

- **It is not CSA if the child “consented”. Some children are highly flirtatious and invite sexual abuse**

Our understanding of “consent” has evolved over the years. We now recognise that a child is never in a position to give consent to sexualised behaviour. There have been many examples in the media, where child victims of abuse have been described as “flirtatious” or “inviting” – this is an example of how we sometimes project onto children an adult’s motivation or mind-set. Rather than seeing the child’s behaviour from a developmental perspective, we can make the mistake of seeing the child as a reflection of ourselves, with motivations and understanding beyond their years. What is important to remember here is that no matter how a child may be behaving, the responsibility for maintaining appropriate sexual boundaries always lies with the adult or the person in a position of power. Abusers will use this myth to keep children silent, telling them, “You made me do it” or “You wanted me to do it”.

We also know a lot more now about grooming, a complex process by which an abuser may normalise a range of sexual behaviours with gradual and increasing severity. The grooming process can be very disturbing for a child as it distorts their reality and can lead to them feeling as though they have been complicit in their abuse.

- **People who look at child pornography on the internet are not really hurting anyone**

We now know that child pornography on the internet is an international industry generating enormous income. Child pornography is not harmless; real children are abused, photographed or filmed. The photographs are not simply a by-product of abuse that would have happened anyway; abuse is taking place specifically to meet the demand for images and films by internet users. Whenever someone views child pornography, they are part of a demand and supply chain that results in children being abused.

- **CSA never involves “pleasure” for the child**

This is a challenging myth and requires great sensitivity. It comes from the myth that sexual abuse is always traumatic, aggressive, painful etc. However, the reality is that many sexually abusive relationships may have some of the characteristics of ‘loving’ or ‘caring’ relationships. An abuser may be softly spoken, give the appearance of caring and behave as if they are a “lover”. It is important to remember here, that this is in appearance only – this is not a consensual relationship between two equals. Whether the sexual contact is “gentle” or aggressive, a child may find that their body responds to the abuse. This is a normal physiological reaction to stimulation and should not be confused with informed consent. Depending on the age or developmental stage of the child, and the nature of the relationship with the abuser, a child or adult survivor may say that they liked the physical feeling, or that they did not like it but their body responded anyway. Acknowledging this can be difficult and infused with shame, but it is important to keep the shame where it belongs – with the abuser, and to recognise that our bodies respond to touch.

- **Children lie about sexual abuse**

This is a powerful myth that has served to keep many children silent. Many abusers will use this myth to their advantage, telling children that no one would believe them. Of course children sometimes tell lies, about all sorts of things, and of course adults sometimes tell lies too. However, we need to consider that if a child discloses abuse, the likelihood that they are telling malicious lies is very small. This myth has parallels with the myth that women lie about being raped, whereas several research studies have shown that the percentage of women who lie about being raped is consistent with the percentage of people who lie about any other crime e.g. burglary. If somebody told you that they had been burgled, your starting point would not be that they must be lying, and so this should not be the starting point with regards to abuse. The belief that a child must be lying has less to do with the likelihood that they are, and more to do with my horror at what they are telling me and what believing them would mean for me. This is a powerful motivator, but one which leaves a child abandoned and unprotected.

To help you to challenge other myths about sexual abuse, it may be useful to consider the following:

- Who does this idea serve?
- Is this idea more likely to keep children safe or those who abuse them safe?
- Can this idea be used to silence children and keep them silent?
- What would it mean for me if this idea were not true?
- Where does the responsibility lie?
- Where is the evidence?