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### The Impact of Sexual Abuse on Children

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# THE IMPACT OF SEXUAL ABUSE ON CHILDREN

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BY ALINA BALTAZAR

## THE TEXTS

“Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward.”  
Psalms 127:3

“Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea.” Matthew 18:3-6

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this seminar is to review the impact of sexual abuse on children, possible causes, how to recognize it in children, protect children from molestation, and where to get treatment for children who have been sexually assaulted. This seminar is from a Biblical perspective.

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## **MATERIALS NEEDED**

Laptop, PowerPoint software, and a projector. This seminar will probably take around 1-1.5 hours.

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### **POLL QUESTION**

How many of you personally know someone who was sexually assaulted as a child/teen or someone who has committed a sexual assault on a child/teen?

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Children are a special gift from God to humanity as mentioned in Psalms 127:3. Jesus tells us we should be more like little children in their humility, innocence, and dependence (Matthew 18:3). Children are completely dependent on adults to care for their basic needs and to provide nurturing love and guidance. Their brains take several years to develop to not only be able to care for their own needs but to have the executive functioning ability to know how their present behavior impacts their future. The human brain isn't fully mature until the mid-20s. A stable and nurturing environment is essential for children to become healthy contributing members of society. There are many ways sin hurts a child's development. One of the most devastating is sexual molestation.

Unfortunately, sexual sin is a common way the devil wants to hurt God's creation and our relationship with Him. There are multiple verses encouraging sexual purity and against sexual immorality. In modern times, sexual expression is considered a positive behavior and not harmful, but even secular individuals and scientists know the harm sexual molestation has on children. Due to the high expectations of sexual behavior among Christians, sexual immorality, especially pertaining to children, has a large stigma. Therefore, the topic is important to address within the church context.

## **RATES**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), child sexual abuse is a significant public health problem. Sexual abuse of a child includes the involvement of a child (person less than 18 years old) in some sort of sexual activity that violates laws or cultural expectations that the child doesn't fully understand, does not consent to, or is developmentally unable to give consent. What may appear as a "consensual" sexual relationship between a 16-year-old teenage girl and a 21-year-old boyfriend is child sexual abuse according to these standards. What an adult may think is voluntary sexual behavior towards them by a child, if used intentionally to sexually arouse that adult, that is also child sexual abuse.

Children often don't realize sexual abuse has occurred or never report sexual abuse out of fear of stigma or reprisal so these estimates may be low. Estimates will vary across different studies and states, but research generally has found that:

- 1 in 4 females and 1 and 6 males in the U.S. will experience a sexual assault before the age of 18.
- 91% of the perpetrators are people known to the child (friends and family members)
- This abuse doesn't just impact the child and family, but also a society with a lifetime economic burden of at least \$9.3 billion as of 2015.

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### DISCUSSION QUESTION

Are these statistics scary to you or do you think it won't happen to your child?

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## IMPACT OF SEXUAL ABUSE ON CHILDREN/TEENS

Of all the adverse childhood experiences a child can have, sexual abuse is the most harmful due to its long-term impact on a child's development. According to the CDC (2022), childhood sexual abuse impacts children/teens/adults in multiple ways.

### BEHAVIORALLY

More likely to use and abuse substances, including opioids, participate in risky sexual behaviors (multiple sexual partners or unprotected sex), and more likely to perpetrate sexual violence.

### EMOTIONALLY

Higher rates of depression, suicide, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). More likely to be victimized later in life. Females who experienced child sexual abuse are 2-13 times more likely to experience sexual assault and twice the risk of domestic violence in adulthood.

### PHYSICALLY

Higher rates of sexually transmitted infections, physical injuries, and chronic conditions later in life (heart disease, obesity, and cancer).

### SPIRITUALLY

Since the vast majority of sexual assaults are committed by trusted adults, this can impact a child's view of a caring heavenly Father. In addition, a child may have wondered how a loving God could have allowed the abuse to happen or didn't save him/her from an abusive home. Jesus knew how harming a child can have devastating effects when he said, "Whoever causes one of these little

ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea.” Mark 9:42.

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### DISCUSSION QUESTION

Those of you who knew someone who was sexually assaulted as a child/teen, how did it impact them?

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Check-in with the participants at this point. Becoming aware of the harm sexual abuse has on a child can be triggering for those who are more emotionally sensitive and especially for those who have experienced childhood emotional trauma themselves. You will want to acknowledge this and reassure them that all these consequences do not happen to all victims and that there is hope and healing for those who do.

### RECOGNIZING SEXUAL ASSAULT IN CHILDREN/TEENS

Children naturally explore their sexuality and reproductive parts as they develop, especially around toilette training and then puberty. When children stop wearing diapers, they seem suddenly aware there is a body part they didn't realize was there that has a function related to the toilette and has certain sensations when touched. As a result, children may touch themselves more or expose themselves to get a reaction. It may continue into the early elementary years when they start interacting more with their peers. Children do notice adults' reactions to these behaviors. Sometimes they like the attention they get for these problematic behaviors. These are signs of normal child development and not symptoms of sexual abuse. Of course, children do need to be trained to set up boundaries related to their reproductive parts, but they shouldn't feel horrified by their body parts based on adults' reactions. Parents are encouraged to teach their children the difference between good and bad touch.

Children tend to enter a latency phase around the age of 7 to puberty where there is limited sexual development. Children get more involved with their same-sex peers and focus more on those relationships and school. As children enter puberty, they may notice more hair growing around their genitals, and then they notice physical changes that lead to new bodily sensations. This is another time of natural curiosity about their reproductive parts that can lead to an increased awareness of and interest in sexuality. This is also normal child development.

It can be difficult to recognize signs of sexual abuse in children. The best way is just to notice any behavior or emotional differences that aren't explained by any other changes in the child's life. They can be very subtle because the abuser is good at hiding what he/she is doing and has probably threatened the child if he/she told anyone. Children often don't realize what is happening to them or how to express their fears and discomfort. Here are some signs a young child might

be experiencing sexual molestation, according to the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN, 2022):

**Physical signs:**

- Sexually transmitted infections
- Signs of trauma around the genital area or unexplained blood on sheets, underwear, or clothing

**Behavioral signs:**

- Excessive talk about or knowledge of sexual topics
- Keeping secrets, not talking as much as usual
- Not wanting to be left alone with certain people or being afraid to be away from primary caregivers, especially if this is a new behavior
- Regressive behaviors or resuming behaviors they had grown out of, such as thumb sucking or bedwetting
- Overly compliant behavior
- Sexual behavior that is inappropriate for the child's age
- Spending an unusual amount of time alone
- Trying to avoid removing clothing to change or bathe

**Emotional signs:**

- Change in eating habits
- Changes in mood or personality, such as increased aggression
- Decrease in confidence or self-image
- Excessive worry or fearfulness
- Increase in unexplained health problems such as stomach aches and headaches
- Loss or decrease in interest in school, activities, and friends
- Nightmares or fear of being alone at night
- Self-harming behaviors

For teens some signs are the same, others are different. If you notice these signs, it is best to mention those concerns to the teen to open a dialogue.

- Unusual weight gain or loss
- Unhealthy eating patterns, like a loss of appetite or excessive eating
- Signs of physical abuse, such as bruises
- Sexually transmitted infections or other genital infections
- Signs of depression
- Anxiety or worry
- Failing grades

- Changes in self-care, such as paying less attention to hygiene, appearance, or fashion than they usually do
- Sexual behavior and dress that is inappropriate and a change from usual behavior
- Self-harming behavior
- Expressing thoughts about suicide or suicidal behavior
- Alcohol or drug use

This list may be difficult to remember and there are other explanations for these behaviors. The best thing to do is to trust your gut and don't ignore your feelings that something is off. The most important thing to remember is to listen to a child if he/she says he/she doesn't feel comfortable around someone or if he/she tells you about some inappropriate sexual behavior with an adult. Believe them, protect them, and get them the help they need. It is not the child/teen's fault, even if he/she chose to be alone or initially agreed with the inappropriate behavior. It is the perpetrator who began the sexually abusive nature of the relationship.

Admittedly, there is a concern about falsely accusing someone of sexual molestation when it didn't occur, but it is best to let the experts figure that out. There are professionals who go through specialized training to investigate accusations of sexual molestation who understand child development and can recognize what reports and symptoms are related to abuse. It is best not to question the child too extensively because it could cause confusion with the child's memory that isn't fully developed yet. The place to go for any concerns of sexual abuse of a child or teen by an adult family member is your local Child Protective Services Agency or Children and Family Services. These reports are anonymous. If the perpetration is being done by another adult, then the local police department is the first step. This is done to protect the child and other children who may be harmed. Child molesters very often victimize multiple children.

## **RISK FACTORS**

How could someone cause such harm to children? You may think these people are monsters and don't go to your church or live in your community. On the surface, many appear to be upstanding citizens, a good spouse and parent, and may even be involved in church leadership. That is part of the manipulation that is also used to groom the child for victimization. Not all child molesters are pedophiles and not all pedophiles molest children. A pedophile is an adult or late-aged adolescent (typically 16 years or older) whose preferred sexual object is pre-pubescent children (typically infants to 13-year-old). Adolescents who are 16 years old must have a 5-year age difference between the child and themselves to be considered a child molester (DSM-IV, TR 2006).

Incest has been a problem in the family since Bible times. Even Moses wrote about it in Leviticus 18:6, "None of you shall approach anyone who is near of kin to him, to uncover his nakedness: I am the Lord". God must have known the harm incest does to families. The usual

incestuous relationship is a father with his daughter or stepfather and stepdaughter. Research has identified some risk factors for father-daughter incest (Stroebe, 2013):

- Verbal or physical abuse in the family
- Families that accept father-daughter nudity
- Families in which the mother never kisses or hugs her daughter
- Families with an adult male other than the biological father in the home (stepfather or mom's boyfriend)

Society is more aware of the sexual abuse that can happen by church clergy. This abuse happens even in Seventh-day Adventist churches. Some research studies have identified patterns of sexual abuse by clergy, including demographics of those typically involved in abuse. Frawley-O'Dea (2004) reported that many alleged sexual abusers in the Catholic Church were newly ordained priests who focused on youth ministry, which is typical for protestant churches too. They would develop friendships with youth, often pre-adolescent or adolescent boys. Slowly the relationships would become physical—then the priest would introduce sexual activity into the relationship. In a detailed analysis of the situation, the John Jay College Research Team (2011) found that—just like non-priest child sexual offenders—there were certain vulnerabilities for those who committed these acts. Perpetrators had an emotional congruence with children and adolescents.

Emotional congruence is an adult overly identifying and connecting emotionally with children (John Jay College, 2011). This congruence is involved in the initiation and maintenance of sexual offences against children and young adolescents because children and youth respond positively to the relationship and feel that they have found an adult who understands them.

Abusers are often lonely, experience increased stress at work, and in their minds, have neutralized their intended sexual activity. Cognitive dissonance may also occur, forcing the abuser to struggle with their view of themselves as “a good person,” yet having committed a deviant act. The result of this struggle is often rationalizing the behavior, focusing on the positive of the relationship as outweighing the cost of the abuse, thus diminishing feelings of responsibility, guilt, and shame (Finkelhor, 1984). In reality, they are grooming the victim and working hard to ensure opportunities for sexual abuse. The development of a strong emotional, even trusting bond with a person in authority is often an essential part of initiating and continuing sexual abuse and reducing the likelihood of reporting. The victim often becomes an “apparent” willing participant and years later may feel they are as “guilty” as the offender is, leading victims to be unsure if they were abused (Doyle, 2003).

Though the abuser is the cause of the abuse, there are known risk factors for children. According to research, certain patterns have been identified:

- Children whose parent(s) is(are) not working
- Children living in poverty



- Children who live in rural areas (Sedlack, et al., 2010)
- Children who witness or are a victim of other crimes (Finkelhor, et al., 2010)
- Perpetrators look for passive children who are quiet, troubled, and lonely who come from single-parent or disrupted homes (Elliott, et al., 1995).
- Children who are trusting, so the perpetrator can develop a trusting relationship with the child before abuse occurs (De Bellis, et al, 2011). This may include building a trusting relationship with the family as well (Elliott et al., 1995).

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### APPLICATION QUESTION

What would you say to a 12-year-old girl who believes she committed adultery because she didn't fight off her cousin's husband who forced himself on her? She is afraid to tell her mom because she thinks her stepfather already doesn't like her and now will think she is a sinner.

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### PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM SEXUAL ASSAULT

Not all children who are abused fit the risk criteria, it can happen to any child. There is no foolproof way to protect all children, but there are steps that can be taken to decrease the risk, according to RAINN (2022).

- Show interest in their day-to-day life
- Get to know the people in their life
- Choose caregivers carefully
- Talk about it. When there are news stories on this topic, that is an opportunity to educate your child to help him/her understand.
- Know the warning signs
- Teach children to set boundaries
- Teach children how to talk about their bodies by knowing the names of their reproductive parts so they can communicate when there is something wrong.
- Let your child know you are available and ready to talk about anything that bothers him/her and then make sure to do that to show you mean what you say.
- Make sure they know they won't get in trouble. Perpetrators often threaten them or make them feel it is their fault.
- If you have any concerns, try using open-ended questions to encourage them to talk, like "What is something that happened today?"

Though having caring adults in a child's life helps with resilience, there needs to be some awareness on how to protect our children from molestation by adults. Families, neighborhoods, schools, and churches are prime places for these relationships to develop. Due to the risk for the development of emotional congruence that can lead to a sexual relationship between the adult and youth, there needs to be boundaries where there isn't excessive time alone or interactions that wouldn't be appropriate if others were around. Adults need to have relationships with other adults for their emotional support so they don't turn to children to fill that need that could develop into a sexual relationship. Adults who have been diagnosed or are aware they have pedophilia must stay away from children to protect both the adult and the child.

Research has identified six recommendations for preventing child sexual abuse at the community level: (1) zero tolerance of child sexual abuse, (2) community involvement in prevention and detection, (3) training in identifying potential abusers, (4) supporting victims of child sexual abuse, (5) protecting those who stand up for victims from harassment, and (6) for church communities to tie the rejection of child sexual abuse with religious values (Pulido, et al., 2021).

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### APPLICATION QUESTION

What can you do to increase your child's safety and for the children in your life?

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### GETTING HELP

Parents struggle with a lot of guilt once they realize their child has been sexually molested. Protecting a child is a primary responsibility of parents, but we can't stop all harm. The harm to the child will vary depending on how young, how long, what abuse occurred, the role of the abuser in the child's life, and the support given by adults. Adults should watch for the problematic symptoms listed earlier and get the child help from a counselor who is trauma trained and works with children who have been molested. A child/teen may not connect well with the therapist. Be open to trying different counselors until the child is comfortable. Counseling may not seem to help much at first, especially if the child is resistant. Once these children become adults, they often see counselors as a resource for when they are ready to heal from childhood traumas. Family counseling may also help to address any conflict that led to or happened after the molestation.

There is help for churches to protect children since perpetrators often take advantage of the trusting relationship that parents and children have with church volunteers or ministry leaders. End it Now is a wonderful resource from the Seventh-day Adventist church. Their website includes information on child protection, screening policies for volunteers, what pastors can do, information about clergy sexual misconduct, how to maintain healthy boundaries for spiritual leaders, and how to deal with sexual predators in church.

## CONCLUSION

When God created man and woman, He began with a relationship based on mutual love and trust. That relationship was designed to be the foundation for a stable, happy family where all members are treated with dignity and worth. Parents are expected to protect, nurture, and protect care for children.

The Bible strongly condemns child sexual abuse. It is a betrayal of God's original plan. When trust is taken advantage of and that relationship with the authority figure causes harm to the child, not only does it harm the child but distorts his/her view of a loving God. Jesus knew this so used strong language to condemn anyone who causes a child to stumble.

The evil one wants nothing more than to harm God's children and hurt families. Sexual sin is a common tool that is used. The Bible gives clear guidance that sets standards, but when those standards aren't kept, there can be a stigma that stops children and families from getting the help that they need. Let us all watch out for our children and speak up when there are concerns.

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### EXERCISE

How can we get past the stigma of talking about the sexual assault of children?

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## RESOURCES

### SEXUAL ABUSE

National Sexual Assault Hotline

Available 24 hours crisis hotline

1-800-656-4673

National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA)

Available 24-hours crisis hotline

1-800-879-6682

Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network.

For additional resources check out this website:

<https://www.rainn.org/national-resources-sexual-assault-survivors-and-their-loved-ones>

### SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH RESOURCE

End it Now <https://www.enditnownorthamerica.org/>

Official statement on child sexual abuse:

<https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/child-sexual-abuse/>

## COUNSELORS

Substance abuse and/or mental health professionals

<https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>

Seventh-day Adventist Counselors

<https://www.nadfamily.org/resources/counselors/>

## SUICIDE

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/> or 1-800-273-8255

## TRAUMA

Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/preventingACES.pdf>

[https://www.cdc.gov/injury/pdfs/priority/ACEs-Strategic-Plan\\_Final\\_508.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/injury/pdfs/priority/ACEs-Strategic-Plan_Final_508.pdf)

## RECOMMENDED BOOKS

Allender, D.B. (2014).

*Wounded Heart: Hope for adult victims of childhood sexual abuse.* NavPress.

Kearney, R.T. (2001).

*Sexually Abused Children: A handbook for families & churches.* InterVarsity Press.

Langberg, D.M. (2014).

*On the Threshold of Hope.* Xulon Press.

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