



KEEPING KIDS SAFE

Female Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse

Most people have a hard time thinking and talking about child sexual abuse, but if we're going to prevent it, we must all think, talk, and take action about it. The Keeping Kids Safe series was created to help parents and primary caregivers learn concrete ways to keep children and teens safe from sexual abuse. The series introduces key concepts and age-appropriate ideas and activities for protecting the children you love and helping them learn and build skills and knowledge that will reduce their risk of being victimized.

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Child sexual abuse is defined as an adult or older child's sexual contact with a child, which may or may not involve physical contact. Sexual abuse can include things such as intercourse or sex of any kind, sexual touching, exhibitionism, sex trafficking, or owning or producing child pornography (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, n.d.-b).

Child sexual abuse is a pervasive issue in the United States and the world. It is a threat to the wellness of a child's physical, emotional, and psychological safety and can lead to long-term emotional, psychological, or behavioral problems.

PERPETRATORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Much of the research around child sexual abuse focuses on male offenders and current data suggest that men are the perpetrators in the majority of child sexual abuse cases (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, n.d.-a; Gerke et al., 2019).

While sexual predators are often assumed to be male, women do perpetrate sexual abuse against children and teenagers. Due to the severe underreporting of child sexual abuse and specifically, the underreporting of abuse by female perpetrators, it is difficult to derive an accurate statistic of the prevalence of sexual abuse by female perpetrators. Research indicates that female offenders are less likely to be reported, charged, and convicted (Tozdan et al., 2019).

Much is still unknown about female sexual predators but initial research helps shed some light on female sexual offenders that may help you keep your child safe from sexual abuse.

Minding Our Language

In this series of fact sheets, we have chosen to use the inclusive words *they*, *their*, and *them* as singular, nongendered pronouns.

Families and parents come in all shapes, sizes, and styles. A *family* may include people who are related by blood, by marriage, and by choice. *Parents* may be biological, step-, foster, adoptive, legally appointed, or something else.

When we use the words *family* and *parent* in this fact sheet, we do so inclusively and with great respect for all adults who care for and work with young people.





CHARACTERISTICS OF FEMALE OFFENDERS

While the characteristics of female offenders can vary greatly, research shows that many female abusers:

- Have mental health problems, including, but not limited to, substance abuse, personality disorders, or low self-esteem.
- Struggle with impulsivity and low emotional self-regulation.
- Have experienced their own sexual abuse, physical abuse, or both in childhood, adulthood, or both.
- Are involved in abusive relationships during adulthood or have an absence of intimate relationships.
- Have experience with domestic violence, family and marital dysfunction, or both. (This dysfunction might include substance abuse or mental illness, volatile family situations, or other circumstances.)
- Are isolated from social supports.

(Tozdan et al., 2019; Grayston & De Luca, 1999; Duncan, 2010)

ABUSE BY FEMALE OFFENDERS

Similarly, abuse by female offenders varies greatly, but research shows several trends that may describe abuse by female offenders. Female offenders:

- Often have relationships with the children they abuse. Many times, they may be a caregiver figure for the children that they abuse ranging from a parent or another caregiver such as a babysitter.
- Can engage in other forms of abuse including physical or emotional abuse, or neglect against children, especially if the child victim is being cared for by the perpetrator.
- Choose victims ranging from infants to adolescents although they may be more likely to abuse younger children.
- Abuse both male and female victims.
- May commit abuse against children independently or with a male partner.
- May be *passive* or *active* offenders:
 - *Passive*, or *indirect*, perpetrators may observe sexual abuse and fail to intervene, or they may expose children to sexual acts such as finding children for male counterparts or co-offenders to abuse.
 - *Active*, or *direct*, perpetrators directly participate in abuse against children by engaging or directing abusive acts (physical or nonphysical, ranging from exhibitionism to fondling, rape, or group sex).
- Can use violence, aggression, and threats during their abuse, but they may also use persuasion and other more subtle grooming techniques.
- Engage in abuse ranging from a one-time event to multiple years of abuse.

(Tozdan et al., 2019; Grayston & De Luca, 1999; Duncan, 2010)





EQUIP YOUR CHILD TO LEAD THE BEST LIFE POSSIBLE

Most parents' goals include keeping their kids safe and equipping them to lead the best lives possible. This can seem like a daunting task. The best thing you can do for your child is to pay attention, stay vigilant, be actively involved in their lives, and make informed decisions about things that could affect their safety. Even if these efforts seem scary or overwhelming, being prepared and vigilant are key steps in both protecting your child and helping them build the skills and competencies that will help them stay safe.

This does not mean that you must prevent your child from going anywhere and from doing absolutely everything. It is a reminder, instead, to use common sense, pay close attention to the people and events around your child, set appropriate boundaries, and stay tuned in. You can do a lot of things to protect your child that shouldn't prevent you and your child from living and enjoying the world around you.

REFERENCES

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FIND OUT MORE

To find out more about keeping kids safe, check out these other Michigan State University Extension resources:

- **Be SAFE: Safe, Affirming and Fair Environments** (<https://bit.ly/36CwUk7>)—The Be SAFE curriculum is designed to help young people aged 11 to 14 and adults work in partnership to create environments that are physically and emotionally safe. It draws from extensive research from a variety of key disciplines, as well as from evidence-based bullying prevention programs. Be SAFE includes engaging activities that promote social and emotional learning and development, address and prevent bullying, and foster positive relationships with peers and adults. Designed for use in out-of-school time settings (such as 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, Scouts, and after-school programs), Be SAFE also applies to middle school settings.





- **Keeping Kids Safe series** (<https://bit.ly/3jG8JFo>)—The fact sheets in this series are designed for parents and adults who work with kids from birth to age 17. They cover issues related to body ownership, boundaries, and safety; consent; identifying and communicating about feelings; monitoring and limiting technology use; sharing about kids on social media; and recognizing and preventing grooming by child sexual predators. There are currently eight titles in the series:
 - Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 0 to 5: <https://bit.ly/3zLjmhG>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 6 to 11: <https://bit.ly/3f8ecEH>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 12 to 17: <https://bit.ly/3zRbWJB>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: The Downside to “Sharenting” on Social Media: <https://bit.ly/3f9toBl>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: Preventing Grooming by Child Sexual Predators: <https://bit.ly/3ib4vXZ>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: How Child Sexual Predators Groom Children: <https://bit.ly/3BWYRFc>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: How Child Sexual Predators Groom Adults, Families, and Communities: <https://bit.ly/3f8F7jM>
 - Keeping Youth Safe Virtually: Best Practices: <https://bit.ly/2VI9Cvr>

These resources also contain helpful information on keeping kids safe:

- American Academy of Pediatrics. (n.d.). *Family media plan*. <https://bit.ly/3iE9Wf1>
- Darkness to Light. (n.d.). *Resources*. <https://www.d2l.org/resources/>
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2018). *Preventing child sexual abuse resources*. <https://bit.ly/34zyAYW>

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