

Sexual Abuse and Sexual Offending: What is the Relationship?

Child sexual abuse causes psychological consequences. The most common reactions are posttraumatic stress and depression. Victims can develop other problems as well, sometimes right away, sometimes later on in life. One common question is about the connection between sexual abuse and sex offending.

Sexual offending in adulthood:

	Children in general	Physically abused	Neglected	Sexually abused
Adult arrest for sex crime	1.6%	6.2%	3.6%	3.9%

The vast majority of sexually abused children (94%) will not be arrested for a sexual offense. The arrest rate is higher than for children in general, but lower than the rate for physically abused children and statistically the same as for neglected children.

Children with problems and later sexual offending:

	Children with problems (e.g., ADHD, learning disabilities)	Children with sexual behavior problems	Children with sexual behavior problems who receive CBT
Official record as adolescent or adult for sexual behavior problems	3%	6%	2%

Most children who are sexually abused do not develop sexual behavior problems. Sexual behavior problems include being overly sexualized, repeated public masturbation, sexual touching with other children, and aggressive sexual behavior. Aggressive sexual behavior can be related to sexual abuse, but other factors are just as or more likely to be the cause. The factors that are important are family violence, parents with serious problems, general child behavior problems, and higher levels of exposure to sexuality in the home.

For those children who do develop sexual behavior problems it is important to get them treatment right away and to make sure that it is an effective treatment. The proven treatment is Child Sexual Behavior Problem CBT. The treatment involves teaching children the sexual behavior rules and a skill for controlling feelings, and improving parental knowledge and supervision. The treatment is relatively brief (~12 sessions), highly structured and focuses on teaching skills to use in real life. Children who have been abused and children with problems are at higher risk but only a small percentage will commit sex offenses later on. When children who have problems get effective treatments right away they are very low risk to harm others.