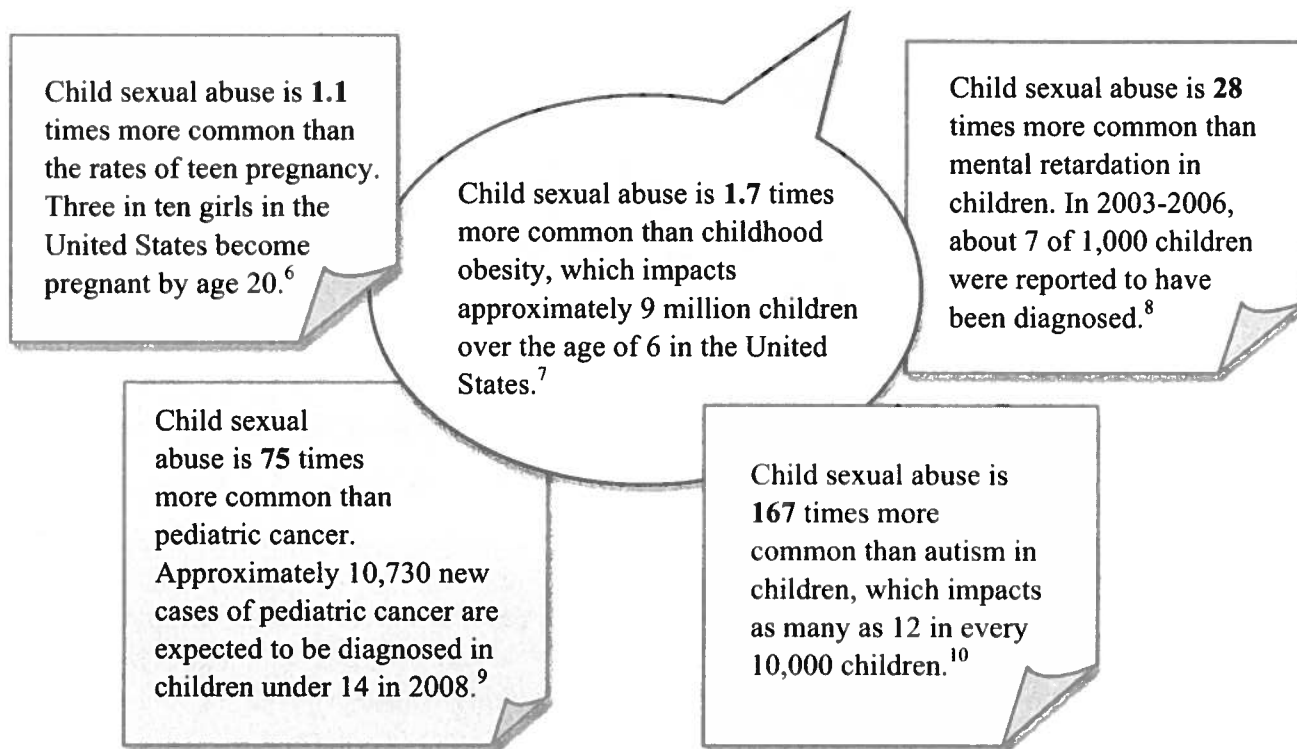


## FACTS FOR PREVENTION: The Health Impact on Children & Youth

One study suggests that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 7 boys will be the victim of some type of sexual abuse or assault before the age of 18.<sup>1</sup> With 75 million children in the United States,<sup>2</sup> this translates to almost 15 million children who will be sexually victimized and abused over the next 18 years.<sup>3</sup> The exploitation of children, and its resulting host of negative health outcomes, should be dealt with as a public health concern.<sup>4</sup>

Consider child sexual abuse in a social context:<sup>5</sup>



*Adapted with permission from Chris Newlin, National Children's Advocacy Center*

*"I am well aware that child sexual abuse and exploitation are huge factors in children's health and in the broader public health. A culture that values its children, invests in its children. It's time to invest in prevention of such abuse." Sharon Cooper, M.D.<sup>11</sup>*

### Research indicates that:

- The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study estimates that 25% of females and 16% of males have experienced sexual abuse as children. The same study indicates that sexual abuse has been associated with significant negative short-term and long-term health impacts for the victims.<sup>12</sup>
- Child sexual abuse impacts health care costs across a lifespan. Healthcare costs are 16% higher for women who experienced child sexual abuse and 36% higher if they experienced both sexual and physical abuse.<sup>13</sup>

- Children now spend 45 hours a week with media, 17 hours with their parents, and 30 hours in school. A strong connection has been proven between media exposure and childhood obesity, smoking, and sexual activity.<sup>14</sup>
- Media viewing is a critical risk factor for aggression, linking media viewing and physical behavior.<sup>15</sup>
- Teens exposed to high levels of televised sexual content were twice as likely to experience a pregnancy during the three-year period, compared to teens with lower levels of exposure.<sup>16</sup>
- Childhood sexual abuse can involve a wide number of psychological sequelae, including low self-esteem, anxiety and depression. Numerous studies have noted that child sexual abuse victims are vulnerable to later sexual victimization as well as the link between child sexual abuse and later engagement in high-risk sexual behavior. Survivors of child sexual abuse are more likely to have multiple sex partners, become pregnant as teenagers, and experience sexual assault as adults.<sup>17</sup>
- Data from 67,853 women in a Nurses Health Survey II, analyzed in 2009, examined lifetime abuse reported in 2001 with risk of diabetes from 1989-2005. The results showed child or teen physical abuse reported by 54% and sexual abuse by 34% of participants. Moderate to severe physical and sexual abuse in childhood and adolescence have dose-response associations with risk of type 2 diabetes among adult women. This excess risk is partially explained by higher BMI of women with a history of early abuse.<sup>18</sup>
- Girls exposed to sexualizing and objectifying media are more likely to develop body image dissatisfaction, eating disorders, depression, low self-esteem and possibly lower academic functioning. The American Psychological Association's Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls noted that consequences of sexualization ranged from mental health issues to negative impact to girls' and women's physical health.<sup>19</sup>

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Have questions?  
Need resources?  
**Get Help Now!**

Online Help Center  
<http://GetHelp.StopItNow.org>

Stop It Now! prevents the sexual abuse of children by mobilizing adults, families and communities to take actions that protect children before they are harmed.



351 Pleasant Street  
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HelpLine: 1.888.PREVENT

## **Warning Signs in Children and Adolescents of Possible Child Sexual Abuse**

Any one sign doesn't mean that a child was sexually abused, but the presence of several suggests that you begin asking questions and consider seeking help. Keep in mind that some of these signs can emerge at other times of stress such as:

- During a divorce
- Death of a family member or pet
- Problems at school or with friends
- Other anxiety-inducing or traumatic events

## **Behavior you may see in a child or adolescent**

- Has nightmares or other sleep problems without an explanation
- Seems distracted or distant at odd times
- Has a sudden change in eating habits
  - Refuses to eat
  - Loses or drastically increases appetite
  - Has trouble swallowing.
- Sudden mood swings: rage, fear, insecurity or withdrawal
- Leaves "clues" that seem likely to provoke a discussion about sexual issues
- Writes, draws, plays or dreams of sexual or frightening images
- Develops new or unusual fear of certain people or places
- Refuses to talk about a secret shared with an adult or older child
- Talks about a new older friend
- Suddenly has money, toys or other gifts without reason
- Thinks of self or body as repulsive, dirty or bad
- Exhibits adult-like sexual behaviors, language and knowledge

## **Signs more typical of younger children**

- An older child behaving like a younger child (such as bed-wetting or thumb sucking)
- Has new words for private body parts
- Resists removing clothes when appropriate times (bath, bed, toileting, diapering)
- Asks other children to behave sexually or play sexual games
- Mimics adult-like sexual behaviors with toys or stuffed animal
- Wetting and soiling accidents unrelated to toilet training



### Signs more typical in adolescents

- Self-injury (cutting, burning)
- Inadequate personal hygiene
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Sexual promiscuity
- Running away from home
- Depression, anxiety
- Suicide attempts
- Fear of intimacy or closeness
- Compulsive eating or dieting

### *Physical warning signs*

Physical signs of sexual abuse are rare. If you see these signs, bring your child to a doctor. Your doctor can help you understand what may be happening and test for sexually transmitted diseases.

- Pain, discoloration, bleeding or discharges in genitals, anus or mouth
- Persistent or recurring pain during urination and bowel movements
- Wetting and soiling accidents unrelated to toilet training

### *What You Can Do If You See Warning Signs*

- Create a Safety Plan. Don't wait for "proof" of child sexual abuse.
- Look for patterns of behavior that make children less safe. Keep track of behaviors that concern you. This Sample Journal Page can be a helpful tool.
- See our Let's Talk Guidebook for tips on speaking up whenever you have a concern.
- If you have questions or would like resources or guidance for responding to a specific situation, visit our Online Help Center, <http://GetHelp.StopItNow.org>.

Remember, the most effective prevention takes place before there's a child victim to heal or an offender to punish.

For more information and guidance, please visit our Online Help Center, <http://GetHelp.StopItNow.org>.

# Transforming Communities to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation:

## A Primary Prevention Approach

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Prevention  
Institute  
Putting prevention  
at the center of community well-being

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**This policy brief presents the distilled research and critical thinking of a diverse group of local and national experts in the field of child sexual abuse and exploitation.** Prevention Institute assembled this team and coordinated their efforts with the generous funding and support of the Ms. Foundation for Women.\* Via candid dialog and interviews, these leaders developed and prioritized primary prevention strategies, analyzed environmental factors and norms that perpetuate these problems, and outlined policies and practices for transforming our communities and our nation during these turbulent political and economic times. This brief focuses especially on strategies that build on previous successes within this field and hold the greatest promise for transforming communities and preventing child abuse and exploitation.

We thank these leaders for their dedication to the field and for their thoughtful insights throughout this process. Likewise, we thank the Ms. Foundation for Women for sponsoring this vital initiative.

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**Prevention Institute**

is a nonprofit, national center dedicated to improving community health and well-being by building momentum for effective primary prevention. Primary prevention means taking action to build resilience and to prevent problems before they occur. The Institute's work is characterized by a strong commitment to community participation and promotion of equitable health outcomes among all social and economic groups. Since its founding in 1997, the organization has focused on injury and violence prevention, traffic safety, health disparities, nutrition and physical activity, and youth development.

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\* Prevention Institute materials are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official positions of the Ms. Foundation for Women.

## OVERVIEW

*“I have a ten-year-old daughter and a five-year-old boy. I want the world my children grow up in to be one where my daughter can live free of violence and my son will be expected to treat all women with respect. We need to invest at a level where we can create this future for our kids.”*

Jim Hafner, Stop It Now! National Office

### Preventing Abuse Before it Occurs: A Primary Prevention Approach

Over the last 30 years, advocates have worked hard to successfully educate us in child sexual abuse and its detrimental effects on children and society. Leaders and the general public alike have a greater understanding of the issue, and this awareness has reached a tipping point over the last ten years, resulting in mobilized groups advocating for social and political solutions to abuse. So far, the response to these demands has largely focused on after-the-fact actions like incarceration and individual protection efforts such as Internet safety campaigns. The next step requires expanding the overarching dialog, moving from a focus on the individual and after-the-fact efforts to an approach that can prevent child sexual abuse from ever happening. A primary prevention approach prevents abuse before it happens by addressing the environmental factors and societal norms that contribute to its occurrence in the first place. Leaders agree that the movement is poised for a greater emphasis on primary prevention, which honors and builds upon past successes and complements the field’s continued commitment to improving responses to this critical issue. This shift will require an increased effort to advance promising primary prevention approaches—essential to achieving dramatic reductions in rates of child sexual abuse and exploitation.

A primary prevention approach to child sexual abuse and exploitation promotes safe, healthy environments and behaviors, reducing the likelihood of abuse<sup>1</sup> in the first place. This approach is often confused with early intervention services for victims and perpetrators. Interventions, such as universal screening in health care settings, may help to alleviate trauma and potentially prevent future incidences; however, early identification is subsequent to actual or threatened violence and seldom alters the broader community and societal environment that gave rise to the violence. Primary prevention moves far upstream to change the environmental factors—such as economic inequalities, sexism, media, and marketing practices—that

*We must begin to shift our focus from individuals to environments, from fear to wellness, and build national momentum for a balanced, targeted investment in quality prevention strategies.*



*A primary prevention approach to child sexual abuse and exploitation promotes safe, healthy environments and behaviors, reducing the likelihood of abuse in the first place.*

shape norms and behaviors of an entire population. Primary prevention of child sexual abuse and exploitation is a systemic process capable of dramatically reshaping our environment and norms. It is a crucial component of community wellness.

Our success in preventing child sexual abuse depends on our ability to maintain a coordinated, comprehensive effort. Research confirms that the issue is deeply rooted in our environment and reinforced by our societal norms. It touches every community—the latest data reports that one in four girls and one in seven boys will be the victim of some type of sexual abuse/assault before age 18.<sup>2</sup> These numbers do not include the various ways children are sexually exploited through technology, pornography, and other commercial sexual exploitation. Further, we know that victims of abuse are at an increased risk for alcoholism, depression, sexually transmitted infections, intimate partner violence, and suicide attempts.<sup>3</sup> The statistics provide an important challenge to our current norms and environments for children and adults: We must begin to shift our focus from individuals to environments, from fear to wellness, and build national momentum for a balanced, targeted investment in quality prevention strategies.

Quality prevention strategies counter environmental factors that support child sexual abuse and exploitation. Examples of these environmental factors include increased marketing towards children and a pervasive media presence with drastically high levels of sexualized messages and rigid gender roles. Root factors, such as marginalization—which increases the risks and decreases the resilience within specific communities—have not been widely acknowledged in policies and practices addressing child sexual abuse and exploitation. As one leader said, “There must be an increased awareness that child sexual abuse and exploitation does not occur in isolation, but instead, stems from deeply rooted social inequities and environmental influences.” These factors are relevant to all communities, and we can focus on them via comprehensive prevention initiatives. As a more progressive agenda is gaining momentum nationally, we have a prime opportunity to examine the current context and push for community transformation on multiple levels, incorporating successful projects from around the nation that help build resilience and protective factors at the individual and community levels. It is also a key moment to organize support for elected officials willing to adopt a legislative agenda that promotes healthy environments for all communities.

***This brief is designed for advocates, practitioners, government officials, and funders who are interested in transforming broad social norms and our communities in order to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation before it occurs.*** The following pages lay out a primary prevention approach with a special focus on effecting change by influencing policies and altering organizational practices. We begin with a short discussion of emerging environmental challenges followed by an examination of specific norms that contribute to child sexual abuse and exploitation. The third section, grounded in the belief that a single individual or sector cannot address the problem in isolation, provides the framework for a comprehensive strategy across the *Spectrum of Prevention* (see Figure 2, page 8) designed to transform environments so all children can thrive in safe and supportive communities.

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