

Resource Article

Sexual Exploitation

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Sexual exploitation has a devastating impact on children and teens. Losing their innocence, virginity, families, homes and safety affects their emotional, spiritual, and intellectual development. Understanding their situations will help you to minister to their needs in a compassionate way.

What You Need to Know

Child Sexual Abuse: This occurs when a young person is used by an adolescent or adult for his own sexual needs. Sexual abusers are usually men, although some women sexually abuse children and teens.

Opportunistic Sex Offender: This person has sex with children when the situation permits. For example, a relative comes to live with the family and abuses the children.

Paedophile: A paedophile prefers to have sex with children. He usually prefers a certain age, gender, or physical look. The paedophile plans the abuse, including when and where he will abuse them. Paedophiles are usually men, but sometimes women help them to locate their victims. The women may lure the children or teens or participate in the offense in other ways.

Child Sex Tourism: This includes child prostitution, paedophile-related child abuse, and pornography. It is often part of the local sex industry and may be used by tourists and locals.

What Happens to the Teens

When teens have been sexually exploited, they feel intense shame, guilt, humiliation, anxiety, fear, and anger. The exploitation causes them to lose respect for themselves. They have lost their dignity. They do not trust anyone. Their experience changes their perception of the world.

There are many emotional and physical results of sexual exploitation. Here are just a few:

- Sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS
- Damaged sexuality (promiscuity, early pregnancy)
- Physical injuries
- Delayed physical development
- Delayed emotional development
- Chronic health problems, including eating disorders
- Headaches and stomach aches
- Short attention span, memory loss, and lack of motivation
- Poor attention to school work
- Running away from home or a care centre
- Substance abuse
- Self-harm, such as cutting or burning
- Depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Suicide or attempted suicide

What You Can Do

Though many of the behaviours on this list may seem defiant or disobedient, they should not be seen this way. They are normal responses to the young person's trauma. Rather than dealing only with the behaviour, try to understand the emotions and experiences that are motivating it.

For example, a teen may think, "I am worthless. I have lost my virginity. It is my fault." She may believe she deserved the mistreatment. She may think that no one will want to marry her. This lack of self-worth may be reflected in her behaviour. She may think that she is unworthy of love or that sex is only meant to be used as a tool or a weapon, so she may engage in prostitution and take money for sex.

There are several important things you can do. First, listen to the teen's words—really listen. Provide a safe place for him to talk. Let him know that sexual abuse makes you angry and that it makes God angry.

Encourage the teen to express his feelings. Then help him to begin to deal with them. You may want to seek professional help. Take the time to gain the teen's trust. Let him know how very much you care. Dealing with his sexual abuse may take a long time. Be committed to continuing with the teen during this process.

Offer unconditional love and acceptance. The teen is not to blame in any way. Help her to understand that being sexually exploited is not her fault and that she is loved and cared for regardless of what has happened to her.

Let the child know that God loves her and that she is infinitely special to Him. The teen is just as valuable to God today as she was before the sexual exploitation.

With your caring influence, the teen can begin to heal. With attention and prayer, teens who have been sexually exploited can once again experience a sense of purpose and hope for a better life.

NOTE: Situations differ around the world, so be aware of what is legal and safe where you live and in the teen's individual situation. If it is appropriate and safe to do so, let the teen know that you will notify the appropriate authorities. Then follow up with the teen after you have reported the exploitation.