

Sexual Abuse and Individuals with Developmental Disabilities

What is Sexual Abuse?

Sexual abuse or molestation is any sexual activity that happens without obtaining mutual consent. This sexual activity can happen using force, verbal or physical threats, or otherwise taking sexual advantage of another person. Sexual abuse could happen once, or repeatedly over a longer time span.

Sexual abuse can be prevented! Direct support professionals (DSPs) can work with the individuals they support to know how to address sexual abuse. This fact sheet can help DSPs frame conversations about sexual abuse with individuals they support.

Privacy and Our Bodies

We are all entitled to privacy, whether it's protecting our bodies (you may not want to be touched in certain places) or our emotions (as when it does not feel safe to tell someone something), or in other domains of life. Everyone's personal choices should be respected.

Giving Consent and Saying "No"

Consent is when you give someone permission to do something. In relationships it is important to ask for consent before touching another person. This can be simple: You can just ask, **"Is this OK?"**, allowing time for another person to answer **"yes"** or **"no."** Sometimes a person touches another person before asking for consent; *this is not OK*.



When someone does not ask for consent before touching, they could place the other person in an uncomfortable position. An unanticipated touch could be perceived as accidental or intended to cause harm.

Every person is entitled to say **"no"** in any situation that makes them feel uncomfortable. Some people find it hard to say **"no"** using words. Other ways to say **"no"** include **crossing arms across your chest** or **shaking your head**. When a person says **"no,"** this choice should always be respected!

A Few Possible Signs of Sexual Abuse

- Bruises around breasts or genital area
- Unexplained sexual infections
- Frequent or recurrent urinary tract infections (UTIs)
- Torn, stained, or bloody clothing
- Nightmares and bed wetting
- Fear of sexuality
- Self-injury

If You Aren't Sure Something Should Be Reported, Report It Anyway

When suspected sexual abuse is not reported, the individual may continue to be victimized and suffer consequences. When this happens, the services and supports needed to assist the individual cannot then be provided.

As mandated reporters, all DSPs (including regional center staff) are required to report all incidents of abuse. Individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities often experience incidents of sexual abuse that remain unreported.



Steps Providers Can Take to Be Prepared to Respond to Incidents of Suspected Sexual Abuse

- **Know ahead of time where to call and how to get help in your community.** Timing can be critical in these situations.
- **Act according to your agency's policies,** ensure that all who need to be notified are informed promptly.
- **Provide comfort and support to the individual.**
- **If possible, preserve any evidence at the scene** of the incident for disposition by law enforcement.
- **Avoid questioning the individual about the incident.** Trained investigators are in the best position to do this.
- **Immediately protect the individual from continued contact with the alleged offender.**
 - If the alleged offender is a DSP or staff, that person should be moved away from direct contact with individuals supported.
 - If the alleged offender is another individual, take precautions to separate them to protect others from harm.
- **Report all suspected abuse to Adult Protective Services immediately.** Do not ignore or dismiss any such reports regardless of whether they appear plausible. *The proper authorities will further advise depending on the situation.*
- **Report all suspected abuse to the Regional Center within 24 hours.** Work with the individual's service coordinator to arrange support services such as counseling and therapy.

Additional Resources

- California Adult Protective Services: <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/adult-protective-services>
- Illinois State campaign "Imagines Project" doc on Women with Disabilities and Sexual Abuse (2010): <http://accessingsafe.wpengin.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/mini-module-4-education-guide.pdf>
- California Coalition against Sexual Assault: <http://www.calcasa.org/>
- National Sexual Assault Hotline: <https://www.rainn.org/>