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Child Sexual Abuse: Please Act If You Suspect a Child Is at Risk

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Another day, another front page story or news headline about how a child was horribly, sexually ravaged by an adult, probably someone they knew and trusted. And, how those who had the knowledge or the authority to help them, failed them miserably, leaving them at risk for further abuse. Children of every gender, age, race, ethnicity, background, socioeconomic status and family structure are at risk for child sexual abuse. No child is immune. Let these stories serve as a call to action.

National statistics show that one in every five children will endure sexual assault by the time they are eighteen. The rates are a bit higher for girls than for boys, but that could also be due to the fact that boys tend to report less often. While there is risk for children of all ages, children are most vulnerable to abuse between the ages of 7 and 13. Think about these statistics in terms of children that you come in contact with each day.

Here are a few important points for parents and concerned adults to keep in mind:

Contrary to any myths surrounding "stranger danger," research estimates that approximately 40% of victims are abused by a family member; another 50% are abused by someone outside the family whom they know and trust. Only about 10% of children are sexually abused by strangers.

As opposed to the more obvious indicators of physical abuse, evidence that a child has been sexually abused is not always obvious. In many cases, there is no physical evidence of the act and many children do not report that they have been abused. Young children may not label or experience their victimization as sexual abuse, particularly in cases of fondling, where the act itself does not feel bad or hurtful.

There are many reasons why children do not disclose being sexually abused, including: threats of harm (to the child and/or the child's family), fear of being removed from the home, fear of upsetting their parents, fear of not being believed, shame or guilt. It is also not uncommon for children to "recant" the abuse due to fears about what will happen to them, their family or the perpetrator.

The thought of someone sexually abusing a child is horrifying to most adults. The idea is so foreign, that many adults cannot fathom that the perpetrator can be someone who they know, like and trust. This, paired with the perpetrator's ability to manipulate others, can often convince anyone, even at times professionals, that they do not have a problem. As many cases that are portrayed in the media have shown, perpetrators are so convincing that parents may even doubt their own child. Perpetrators may also be very good at giving excuses, such as being intoxicated or claiming that the child "came on" to them.

"Grooming" refers to a range of behaviors that offenders use to "prepare" children for child sexual abuse. By building connections with a child, offenders aim to lower their inhibitions or desensitize the child. Offenders usually select children who are easily available to him/her. They focus on children who are open to adult friendships and enjoy this attention.

- The first step in grooming is the offender seeking out the child.
- The second step is forming a relationship, building trust, buying gifts, taking the child on special trips, usually with their parents' full endorsement.
- The third step is finding ways to touch the child as often as possible, thereby confusing the child when the touch becomes sexual in nature.
- Following this, the offender finds ways to get the child alone, such as on overnight trip, babysitting, taking the child for a day trip etc. As the process continues, the offender may start to make the child feel guilt or blame and promote secrecy. This is done with the intent that if the child feels responsible for the behavior, they will not tell anyone about the offender. At this stage, the perpetrator may bribe the child, or in contrast, threaten the child in order to maintain secrecy.

If you have suspicions that your child, or a child you know, may be caught in this type of perilous situation, you need to take action. Remain calm and try to get the child to tell you what happened in their own words. Ask open ended questions and let them tell you as much as they can. Once you have some of the details, act. If the alleged perpetrator is a parent or caretaker of the child, the State Child Abuse Hotline must be called. Every State has one; just type Child Abuse Hotline and the name of your State into your browser and it will appear. If you believe that the perpetrator was someone outside of the home, such as a family friend, neighbor, teacher, etc. the police should be contacted. These officials are trained in responding to these types of situations. You will have taken action to protect your child, and probably other children, from the perpetrator.

For more information on signs and symptoms of child sexual abuse, talking to your child about sexual abuse and other child safety information visit www.nyspcc.org.