

families. Sexual assault services are available at some hospitals, including Royal North Shore, and both the New Children's Hospital, Westmead and the Sydney Children's Hospital, Randwick. Other services include Blacktown/Mt Druitt Sexual Assault Service (02) 9831 7855); Liverpool Sexual Assault Service (02) 9828 4844; Macarthur Sexual Assault Service (046) 29 2100; Urunga House Sexual Assault Service, Illawarra, (042) 201 408). Your local hospital can also put you in touch with the nearest sexual assault service.



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Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.

Preventing child sexual assault

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NSW HEALTH
DEPARTMENT

Preventing Child Sexual Assault

Child sexual assault happens when an adult or someone bigger than a child uses his or her power or authority (or takes advantage of a child's trust or respect) to involve a child in sexual activity. It's also a crime, and although we may find it difficult to believe, it's a crime which occurs in all communities.

Until recently, child sexual assault was hardly ever discussed. Because of this silence there have been many mistaken beliefs about the problem. Many people believe that children are usually assaulted by strangers or by people who are "sick" or "perverted". Another common idea is that victims of child sexual abuse are usually teenage girls, and that this kind of abuse happens only in poor or "problem" families.

But now that the facts about child sexual abuse are emerging, we know that in 85 per cent of cases, children are sexually assaulted by relatives, family friends or someone known and trusted by the child. Offenders are usually ordinary men (and occasionally women). They're often married and have good jobs, and they assault children of both sexes and all ages - including babies.

We also know that offenders try to justify their behaviour with excuses like "I was only showing affection", "my wife is pregnant", "my wife doesn't like sex", or "it was the child's fault - she led me on". But there are no excuses for child sexual assault.

Finding out that a child has been sexually assaulted is upsetting. But although you may be angry and shocked, it's important for the child's sake to be calm and comforting, and reassure him or her that it is not the child's fault.

Sometimes there are signs a child has been sexually abused. These include: withdrawal; sexual behaviour which is inappropriate for their age; complaints of pain, itching or injury in the genital area; reluctance to go to school; decline in school performance; sexual play or drawing. If you suspect a child has been sexually abused and need advice, you can contact these organisations: a sexual assault service (see below), Dympna House, a counselling service for child sexual abuse on (02) 9797 6733, the Child Protection and Family Crisis Service 1800 066 777, or the nearest Department of Community Services office, or the police. If you are uncertain if your concerns are real, it is okay to ring up and speak anonymously to these organisations.

When a child has been sexually assaulted, some families believe it's best for the child and everyone else to do nothing. But if responsible adults do nothing, offenders may continue assaulting this child or other children. Research into sexual assault has found that children appreciate adults acting to protect them.

A child who's been assaulted may also benefit from talking confidentially to a specially trained counsellor from a Sexual Assault Centre. It's hard for families to discuss child sexual abuse with strangers, of course, but it's also important to understand that children who've been sexually assaulted may have problems as a result. They may have difficulty trusting people, for example, or they may feel bad about themselves. Counselling can help prevent problems. Remember that it's part of a counsellor's job not to repeat anything clients say to anyone outside the service. The same rules also apply to interpreters.

Many sexual assault services have workers trained to help children who have been sexually assaulted, as well as their