

WHEN A YOUNG PERSON EXPERIENCES SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Guide for parents and guardians

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What is sexual violence?

There are many forms of sexual violence, from touching to rape, and it occurs regardless of the victim's gender. Sexual violence can include name-calling, harassment or exposure to sex and sexual activity that is not age-appropriate.

A young person or child may not necessarily identify or acknowledge the experience as a sexual offence, abuse or violence. Sexual violence may include persuasion, such as giving the victim gifts or buying him or her presents, pressuring the victim or using violent coercion. The perpetrator may be a family member, a relative, a familiar person or a completely stranger.

The perpetrator of violence can gradually sneak into the young person's life, building trust in the process. In such a case, abuse occurs without the young person understanding it in that moment. This can happen in contacts made online. On the internet, sexual offences may involve sexual messages or images streamed through a webcam. Some of the offences that have started online lead to physical violence.

Why is it important to process the experience of sexual violence?

A person's sexuality is an area vulnerable to violations. If left unprocessed, an experience of sexual violence can cause long-term harm and reduce the victim's quality of life. It may lead to difficulties in the young person's social interactions and close relationships, such as dating and intimate partnerships, as a result of the violation of the boundaries of the young person's body and mind and trust in people. An unprocessed experience of sexual violence can come to prevent the young person's development towards balanced adulthood.

What sorts of symptoms do young people have?

Young people can react to the violence they have experienced in various ways. The symptoms may include depression, withdrawal from friends, and feelings of exclusion and loneliness. Sexual violence causes guilt and shame because it crosses the individual's personal boundaries and intimacy. The young person may try and numb down his or her emotions with intoxicants or deny the incident. The emotions may also emerge as crying and rage that come up in unexpected situations.

Young people may direct their disregard and hatred at their own body, which can manifest as the negligence and harm caused to one's own body (cutting, not eating, poor hygiene). Fear and panic reactions may make it difficult for the young person to fall and stay asleep. The young person may have a fear of pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases after the experience of violence. The young person's school performance may suffer as an experience of violence affects concentration, alertness, memory and learning.

Young people usually find it difficult to talk to their parents or guardians about experiencing sexual violence. Young people tend to protect their parents from suffering and feeling bad, and often feel guilty of what has happened. This may manifest as the young person's accentuated need to show that he or she is doing well and as downplaying what has happened.

The stages of a traumatic crisis

Immediately after experiencing violence, a young person is usually unable to process what has happened. It can take days for the young person to recall the incident.

During the reaction phase (1 day–2 weeks), the incident keeps involuntarily coming back to the young person's mind. The young person's symptoms may include irritability and difficulty sleeping. Bodily reactions, such as hyperactivity or fatigue and avoidance, are common.

At the processing stage, the young person starts processing what has happened. The person needs a great deal of help at this point in structuring the experience.

During the integration phase, the young person starts to get used to the fact that he or she has experienced violence. At the same time, the person starts to build an idea that he or she will be able to live with the experience.

How to support your child?

It is important that the parents have an accepting attitude towards the young person. The young person's life is not ruined by having experienced sexual violence, and with sufficient support, the person will be able to cope with the experiences and be capable of having good interpersonal relationships.

The parent's task is to ensure that everyday life is running smoothly. It is important to take care of the young person's basic needs, such as sleeping, eating, sufficient physical activity and sticking to a daily rhythm, as is attending school or studies based on the young person's coping.

Sticking to everyday routines strengthens the person's sense of security that has been destabilised by the experience of violence.

It is not always easy to assess the mental welfare of a young person who has experienced sexual violence. For some young people, an assessment and assistance by a doctor and possibly medication may be crucial.

The parent must allow the young person to regulate his or her distance to the parents. The young person may seem absent-minded, in which case it would be important to help bring him or her back to the present moment through everyday activities involving talking and doing things.

The young person may not necessarily want to be touched and hugged when the parents would like to show that they care in these ways. This may make parents feel useless and hurt.

Parents should pay attention to whether or not the young person wants to talk about the experience. Although speaking is important, the parent should respect the young person's choice not to talk about the incident.

It is a good idea to tell the young person that the parents are there for him or her whenever needed. Even if the young person's attitude is dismissive, it is important for the person to know that he or she has the parents' support.

The time it takes to process an experience of violence varies from one person to another. While one person may need long-term therapy, shorter-term support may be enough for another. The most important thing is that the young person can discuss the experience with a professional they can trust.

Despite difficult experiences, it is a good idea to encourage young people and guide them to engage in age-appropriate activities, friendships and hobbies, and to remind them that life goes on.

The criminal process and legal proceedings

The young person has a right to a support person at all stages of the criminal process. A person under 18 years of age is entitled to receiving help from the authorities, professional support persons and child welfare services alike. Legal representative services are always free of charge to the victims of sexual offences, and you get to pick your own lawyer.

The police and the judicial system and using their services may seem scary to the young person. However, it is important that the issue is taken to the police for investigation.

Investigating a crime may require measures that the young person finds difficult, such as laboratory tests, samples taken from intimate body parts and photography, but they are essential for the investigation. The police will interview the young person and may also video record the interviews.

Whether a minor or not, when a young person experiences sexual violence, he or she also needs the support of guardians. It is a good idea to involve young people in the criminal process to provide them with an experience of personal agency in getting to defend themselves and their rights. At best, this can become an integrative experience supporting the young person's recovery.

How to take care of yourself?

Good everyday parenthood is enough, you do not have to take responsibility for the processing of the experience. The best way to support the young person is by accepting him or her. To be able to support the young person, it is important that you also seek and receive help for yourself.

When your family member experienced violence, the ensuing crisis affects your whole family. Find a way to talk to a person you trust, preferably a professional. Your local health centre and the social welfare and crisis emergency services of cities and municipalities refer their clients to appropriate help.

Various organisations and actors also offer help in the form of discussions and peer support (Tukinainen, the Mental Health Finland helpline, the MLL's helpline for children and young people, the Family Federation of Finland, Victim Support Finland, family counselling clinics, Tyttöjen Talo and Poikien Talo (Girls' and Boys' Houses), NuoRiku).

Believe what the young person tells you. Be aware of your emotional reactions and stay calm even if you are angry, furious or sad and unaware of how to act.

The feelings of the parent and guardian often vary from guilt to shame and disbelief, and your parenthood and trust in your own abilities as a parent may flounder.

The sexual violence experienced by the child or young person may also violate the parent's own sexuality and cause challenges in his or her relationship.

You should use caution in deciding whether to tell your friends and relatives about the violence experienced by the young person. You must respect the young person and his or her will if you intend to discuss the incident with others. On the other hand, keeping it as a secret may feel stressful, as it can make the family feel excluded and isolated.

Tyttöjen Talo (Girls' House) and Poikien Talo (Boy's House) activities are free of charge and include

- individual support

- professionally guided peer group support

- individual and group support for guardians

- consultation and support related to sexual violence issues.

Work related to sexual violence at Tyttöjen Talo (Girls' House)

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