

## What is incest?

Incest is any sexual contact between a child or adolescent and a person who is closely related or perceived to be related, including step-parents and live-in partners of parents. The person initiating contact is usually a parent or step-parent, most often male. Incest perpetrators also include siblings, cousins, mothers, uncles, aunts or grandparents. The activity may happen once or many times over a period of years. Such activity is illegal.

## What are some characteristics of families in which incest occurs?

Families in which incest occurs often appear no different than other families. However, secrecy, isolation and psychological stress are major parts of family life. Children in these families commonly feel guilty about the abuse they suffer, not understanding that it comes from choices made by the adult abuser.

Abusers come from all races, religious groups, income levels, professions and age groups. They may enjoy good reputations in their communities and seem quite normal. In reality abusers are emotionally distressed, isolated, and immature. They have false or distorted ideas about sexuality and often believe that there is nothing wrong with their abusive behavior.

Some abusers, particularly male abusers, tend to think that they have a right to control the family and behave in a forceful manner. Other abusers get power by appearing helpless and needy, pressuring their victims to take care of their needs and feel sorry for them.

A non-abusive mother in the family usually gives her children the feeling that she is unable to influence what happens in the family. She may be overworked and ill much of the time, depressed, economically dependent, or cut off from social contacts outside the family. She may be an unacknowledged victim of sexual assault herself.

## What should a person do who suspects that a child is being victimized?

Anyone who suspects that a child is being abused in any way should report those suspicions to Child Protective Services (CPS) or a local law enforcement agency. The statewide child abuse hotline telephone number is 1-800-252-5400.

## Possible Signs That a Child May Have Been Victimized

Young children may exhibit one or more of the following behaviors:

- reverting to bed-wetting, clinging or whining
- sexual knowledge, behavior or language unusual for their age
- withdrawal from other people
- frequent genital or bowel movement problems
- unexplained gagging or vomiting
- loss of appetite
- agitation, hyperactivity, irritability or aggressiveness
- seducing/acting out sex acts with other children

Signs of abuse in older children may include:

- skipping school, change in school performance
- eating disorders
- depression, anxiety or mood swings
- poor self-image or self-hatred
- substance abuse
- running away or fear of going home
- repeated physical complaints such as infections, cramping or abdominal pains
- dizziness, gagging and severe headaches
- self-destructive or mutilating behaviors such as cutting, burning, and suicide attempts
- seductive or promiscuous behavior and/or prostitution

## What problems might incest create for children?

When “protector” and “abuser” are the same person, the child learns that it is not safe to trust. Inability to trust others is a major problem for incest survivors.

Abused children usually believe that their abuse is the result of something they did or that they deserve to be abused for some reason. They may also believe that all families are like theirs...that children are commonly abused by older family members and forced to keep the abuse a secret.

It is often difficult for abused children to get help. Telling the family “secret” opens the family to outside pressures and increases a child’s feelings of not being safe. Children may not believe that anything will be done once the abuse is revealed or that too much will be done and they will be blamed for the disruption in their family. They may hope that the abuse will simply end.

## How do abused children handle their abuse?

Incest creates much mental and physical stress for victimized children. They are forced to develop unusual methods of maintaining a small sense of security and control during abusive situations, including:

- separating themselves from the experience by blanking out, or by being somewhere else in their minds during the abuse
- making certain parts of their bodies numb or deadened to pain, or creating pain to distract them from the pain of the abuse (biting their lips or holding their breath)
- using alcohol or drugs to numb themselves to emotional and physical pain during or after the abuse
- pretending to be asleep during the abuse and making their bodies go limp

## How does incest affect the lives of incest survivors?

Incest experiences may lead children to form negative opinions about themselves, resulting in serious depression, guilt and feelings of powerlessness. Self-destructive behaviors, that include involvement in victimizing relationships, may result.

Incest victims may learn that their role in relationships is to give to others without expecting to be nurtured in return. Their sexuality is used in a way that may make them fearful of being touched.

Many victims have negative feelings about their bodies, perform poorly in school because they are unable to concentrate, or get into trouble due to fighting or other antisocial behaviors. During adolescence they may become more and more isolated socially and emotionally.



Incest victims often take sexuality to one extreme or the other - withdrawing from voluntary sexual activity because it creates anxiety or other painful feelings, or becoming highly sexually active because it is the only way they know to get affection or to feel in control. Male incest survivors may reject "maleness" because their abuser was male, or go out of their way to demonstrate their own "maleness" in order to feel in control of their lives.

Incest victims may feel that they make poor judgments about other people. They are likely to have little, if any experience with forming good relationships.

Some children may respond sexually to the abuse as a way of getting relief from the tension it creates. This may cause increased feelings of guilt and confusion.

## How can incest survivors help themselves?

Many incest survivors overcome their abuse and live rewarding lives, but the healing process may be long and difficult. Professional counseling is usually necessary.

Incest survivors can learn to make good decisions about relationships. They can learn to feel better about their bodies by developing a sense of ownership and control over them. They can learn to distinguish between touching which is caring and touching which merely uses their bodies. They can learn to be assertive and establish personal boundaries in relationships.

### Resources

Rape Abuse and Incest National Network  
1-800-656-HOPE (4673)  
[www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

Texas Crime Victims Compensation Fund  
1-800-983-9933

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services  
To report child abuse or neglect, call 1-800-252-5400  
[www.dfps.state.tx.us/](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/)



6200 La Calma  
Suite 110  
Austin, Texas 78752  
[www.taasa.org](http://www.taasa.org)

# Incest Sexual Abuse Within the Family



*The voice of sexual violence survivors in Texas.*

National Sexual Assault Hotline  
Free. Confidential. 24/7.

1-800-656-HOPE