

Sex? Or Sexual Abuse?

respect yourself—
know the difference

I was 17 years old the night of graduation. My best friend and I ditched the senior grad night to hang out with two older guys we knew. We showed up and I told the guy that I didn't want to have sex, which I told him because he took advantage of me before when I was drunk. But I figured that had been my fault since I was drunk. When I started drinking I can remember getting very dizzy, like I was going to pass out. The last thing I remember is my best friend laughing and taking a shot. The next morning I woke up naked in bed with one of the guys. I had no idea what happened. Every now and then this guy will call me, but I don't answer. I am not sure if what happened was my fault.

Amber, 18, sexual assault survivor*

When sex is used as a weapon, or a way of controlling someone, or to satisfy one person's sexual needs, it isn't love. It isn't even really sex—it's sexual abuse, and people who use sex to manipulate, control, or harm other people aren't boyfriends, or girlfriends, or lovers, they are *perpetrators*.

Knowing the difference between sex and sexual abuse isn't always easy. Perpetrators of sexual abuse often try to make their victims feel ashamed or responsible for the abuse, or to convince them that the abuse is a form of love. Some perpetrators will engage children in sexual activities in such a playful way that the young child might like the attention and might not understand that the perpetrator's behavior was sexually abusive. Following are some classic "red flags" of sexual abuse.

*Not her real name.

1. Using Physical Force

If a person physically forces you to engage in sexual acts, watch sexual material (such as dirty movies or pictures), won't let you leave, physically threatens you, or otherwise forces you against your will—it's sexual abuse.

Teens account for 51% of all reported sexual abuse.

Source: <http://www.teenhelp.com/teen-abuse>

2. Using Emotional or Psychological Force

If a person who is in a position of power or trust—like a teacher, older relative, or boss—makes you feel like you have to engage in sexual acts or watch sexual material with them—it's abuse.

My stepfather began touching himself and staring at me nearly every day. Every time, I just stayed still, clenched my teeth and waited until he was finished. I thought that if I ignored him he would eventually stop. I was wrong . . .

He would write me letters saying that I was the devil's child and that I seduced him. He left sticky-notes in front of the computer with phrases like "You're a whore" and, "You know you have fantasies about me."

Tabitha,* 17-year-old sexual abuse survivor

<http://www.youthcomm.org/NYC%20Features/April2009/NYC-2009-04-22.html>

3. The Old Bait and Switch

If a person starts out doing things that seem innocent and playful (tickling, a friendly hug) and then starts touching you or making you touch them in unwanted sexual ways—it's abuse.



*Not her real name.

4. Secrecy

If a person engages in an unwanted sexual act with you and then pressures you to keep it a secret—or threatens you with harm if you tell—it’s abuse.

5. Blaming the Victim

If a person forces you to engage in a sexual act and then says that it was your fault because you were drunk/high, “asked for it” by wearing certain clothes or looking a certain way, or were lying when you said you didn’t want to—it’s abuse.



Understanding Date Rape

Date rape (sometimes called acquaintance rape) is when somebody you know uses physical force, drugs or alcohol, or emotional pressure to make you engage in unwanted sexual activities.

There are steps you can take to lower your risk of date rape. For more info on staying safe—and on what to do if date rape occurs—check out the following resources from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network:

- Preventing Acquaintance Rape
http://nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/caring/preventingacquaintancerape.pdf
- What do I do now? A Survival Guide for Victims of Acquaintance Rape
http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/caring/acquaintancerapeguideforvictims.pdf

Recommended Citation: Child Sexual Abuse Collaborative Group, National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2011). *Sex? Or sexual abuse? Respecting yourself—know the difference*. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

Copyright: Copyright © 2011, National Center for Child Traumatic Stress on behalf of the Child Sexual Abuse Collaborative Group, National Child Traumatic Stress Network. This work was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which retains for itself and others acting on its behalf a nonexclusive, irrevocable worldwide license to reproduce, prepare derivative works, and distribute this work by or on behalf of the Government. All other rights are reserved by the copyright holder(s).

National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.