

SECRET SURVIVORS

USING THEATER TO BREAK THE SILENCE

TOOLKIT AND DISCUSSION GUIDE + DOCUMENTARY

About Child Sexual Abuse

The term child sexual abuse describes a variety of sexually abusive, exploitative and violent acts perpetrated against young people from birth through adolescence by an adult, adolescent or older child.

Child sexual abuse may include but is not limited to:

- rape (penetration of the mouth/anus/vagina by genitalia/fingers/mouth/objects)
- molestation (sexually touching a minor or making a minor touch one in a sexual way)
- exposing a minor to or involving them in pornography
- encouraging a child to be in sexually exploitative pictures (child sexual abuse images)
- exposure to or involvement in prostitution
- exposing one's genitals to a child
- masturbating in front of a child

Child sexual abuse is endemic to our society, however, due to social taboos; very few survivors share their stories publicly. The majority of survivors never report their abuse to authorities, and many never tell anyone at all. Everyone knows at least one survivor, even though they may not realize it.

Child sexual abuse is often, but not always, accompanied by other forms of abuse including neglect, emotional abuse and verbal or physical violence or threats of violence if the child tells someone about the abuse. At times, victims may experience the sexual abuse as physically pleasurable, or may be happy to receive attention or gifts for colluding with the secrecy that allows such violence to occur; such reactions in victims should never be mistaken as consent or as in any way minimizing the abusive behavior on the part of the perpetrator(s).

The silence around this endemic violence has devastating effects for the individuals directly harmed, for the people perpetrating this harm (who are rarely held accountable or given tools and support to help them change their behavior), and for society in general. Because child sexual abuse is inherently about domination and power, children who experience this violence learn early lessons about accepting disempowerment, internalizing shame, and remaining silent in the face of grievous injustice. It is a cornerstone of oppression and cyclical violence. Survivors of child sexual abuse often experience long-term adverse health effects such as addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicide, being drawn to violent intimate partnerships, and eating disorders. Moreover, child sexual abuse is often used as a tool to support war and colonization and has frequently been a component in situations of political dominance, suffered, for instance, by slaves in the Americas, by Native Americans in boarding schools, and during some religious missionary expeditions.