

Myths and Facts About Male Sexual Abuse and Assault

Many people have absorbed the myths to some extent. Below, we outline the myths *and* the facts—to encourage understanding and healing.

- **Key Facts**
- **Myth 1 - Boys can't be sexually abused**
- **Myth 2 - It was his fault**
- **Myth 3 - Sexual abuse is less harmful to males**
- **Myth 4 - Only gay men sexually abuse**
- **Myth 5 - Being a male survivor means you're gay**
- **Myth 6 - Males abused by females "got lucky"**
- **Myth 7 - Male survivors will abuse others**
- **Some Final Points**

Cultural myths surrounding the sexual abuse and assault of boys and men can be serious obstacles to understanding and healing, so it's important to learn just how wrong they are. Before exploring the myths, though, here are some key facts:

Key Facts

1. Boys and men can be sexually used or abused, and it has nothing to do with how masculine they are.
2. If a boy liked the attention he was getting, or got sexually aroused during the abuse, or even sometimes wanted the attention or sexual contact, this does not mean he wanted or liked being manipulated or abused, or that any part of what happened, in any way, was his responsibility or fault.
3. Sexual abuse and assault harms boys/men and girls/women in ways that are similar and different, but equally harmful.
4. Boys can be sexually abused by both straight and gay men and women. Sexual abuse is the result of abusive behaviour that takes advantage of a child's vulnerability and is in no way related to the sexual orientation of the abusive person.

5. Whether he is gay, straight or bisexual, a boy's sexual orientation is neither the cause nor the result of sexual abuse. By focusing on the abusive nature of sexual abuse rather than the sexual aspects of the interaction, it becomes easier to understand that sexual abuse has nothing to do with a boy's sexual orientation.
6. Girls and women can sexually abuse or assault boys and men. The boys and men are not "lucky," but exploited and harmed.
7. Most boys and men who are sexually abused or assaulted will not go on to sexually abuse or assault others.

1. The myth that boys can't be sexually used or abused, and if one is, he can never be a "real man."

Everyone absorbs the myth that males aren't victims, to some extent. It's central to masculine gender socialization, and boys pick up on it very early in life. This myth implies that a boy or man who has been sexually used or abused will never be a "real man." Our society expects males to be able to protect themselves. Successful men are depicted as never being vulnerable, either physically or emotionally.

Whether you agree with that definition of masculinity or not, boys are not men. They are children. They are weaker and more vulnerable than those who sexually abuse or exploit them - who use their greater size, strength and knowledge to manipulate or coerce boys into unwanted sexual experiences and staying silent. This is usually done from a position of authority (e.g., coach, teacher, religious leader) or status (e.g. older cousin, admired athlete, social leader), using whatever means are available to reduce resistance, such as attention, special privileges, money or other gifts, promises or bribes, even outright threats.

What happens to any of us as children does not need to define us as adults or men. It is important to remember that 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused before age 18, and that those boys can grow up to be strong, powerful, courageous and healthy men.

2. The myth that if a boy experienced sexual arousal during abuse, he wanted and/or enjoyed it, and if he ever did partly want the sexual experiences, then they were his fault.

Many boys and men believe this myth and feel lots of guilt and shame because they got physically aroused during the abuse. It is important to understand that males can respond to sexual stimulation with an erection or even an orgasm - even in sexual situations that are traumatic or painful. That's just how male bodies and brains work.

Those who sexually use and abuse boys know this. They often attempt to maintain secrecy, and to keep the abuse going, by telling the child that his sexual response shows he was a willing participant and complicit in the abuse. "You wanted it. You liked it," they say.

But that doesn't make it true. Boys are not seeking to be sexually abused or exploited. They can, however, be manipulated into experiences they do not like, or even understand, at the time.

There are many situations where a boy, after being gradually manipulated with attention, affection and gifts, feels like he wants such attention and sexual experiences. In an otherwise lonely life (for example, one lacking in parental attention or affection - even for a brief period), the attention and pleasure of sexual contact from someone the boy admires can feel good.

But in reality, it's still about a boy who was vulnerable to manipulation. It's still about a boy who was betrayed by someone who selfishly exploited the boy's needs for attention and affection to use him sexually.

3. The myth that sexual abuse is less harmful to boys than girls.

Most studies show that the long-term effects of sexual abuse and assault can be quite damaging for both males and females. One large study, conducted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, found that the sexual abuse of boys was more likely to involve penetration of some kind, which is associated with greater psychological harm.

The harm caused by sexual abuse or assault mostly depends on things not determined by gender, including: the abuser's identity, the duration of the abuse, whether the child told anyone at the time, and if so, whether the child was believed and helped.

Many boys suffer harm because adults who could believe them and help are reluctant, or refuse, to acknowledge what happened and the harm it caused. This increases the harm, especially the shame felt by boys and men, and leads many to believe they have

to "tough it out" on their own. And that, of course, makes it harder to seek needed help in the midst of the abuse, or even years later when help is still needed.

The myth that most men who sexually abuse boys are gay.

Studies about this question suggest that men who have sexually abused a boy most often identify as heterosexual and often are involved in adult heterosexual relationships at the time of abusive interaction. There is no indication that a gay man is more likely to engage in sexually abusive behavior than a straight man and some studies even suggest it is less likely. But sexual abuse is not a sexual "relationship," - it's an assault. The sexual orientation of the abusive person is not really relevant to the abusive interaction. A man who sexually abuses or exploits boys is not engaging in a homosexual interaction - any more than men who sexually abuse or exploit girls are engaging in heterosexual behaviour. He is a deeply confused individual who, for various reasons, desires to sexually use or abuse a child, and has acted on that desire.

5. The myth that boys abused by males must have attracted the abuse because they are gay or they become gay as a result.

There are different theories about how sexual orientation develops, but experts in human sexuality do not believe that sexual abuse or premature sexual experiences play a significant role. There is no good evidence that someone can "make" another person be homosexual or heterosexual. Sexual orientation is a complex issue and there is no single answer or theory that explains why someone identifies himself as homosexual, heterosexual or bi-sexual.

It is common, however, for boys and men who have been abused to express confusion about their sexual identity and orientation, whether they identify as straight, gay or bi-sexual. Some guys who identify as heterosexual, fear that, due to their experiences as boys, they must "really" be homosexual. They may believe this would mean that they can't be a "real man," as defined by the larger society. Even men who clearly identify as heterosexual, and men who project very traditional heterosexual traits, may fear that others will "find them out" as gay or not real men. Men who identify as gay or bi-sexual may wonder if their sexual orientation was influenced in any way by the abusive experience or may even be the cause of their orientation.

Also, many boys abused by males wonder if something about them sexually attracted the person who abused them and will unknowingly attract other males who will misuse them. While these are understandable fears, they are not true. One of the great tragedies of childhood sexual abuse is how it robs a person's natural right to discover his own sexuality in his own time.

It is very important to remember that abuse arises from the abusive persons's failure to develop and maintain healthy adult sexual relationships, and his or her willingness to sexually use and abuse kids. It has nothing to do with the preferences or desires of the child who is abused, and therefore cannot determine a person's natural sexual identity.

6. The myth that if a female used or abused a boy, he was "lucky," and if he doesn't feel that way there's something wrong with him.

This myth, like several of the others, comes from the image of masculinity that boys learn from very early. It says not only that males can't be sexually abused, but that any sexual experience with girls and women, especially older ones, is evidence that he's a "real man." Again, the confusion comes from focusing on the sexual aspect rather than the abusive one - the exploitation and betrayal by a more powerful, trusted or admired person (who can be a child or adult).

In reality, premature, coerced or otherwise abusive or exploitive sexual experiences are never positive - whether they are imposed by an older sister, sister of a friend, baby sitter, neighbour, aunt, mother, or any other female in a position of power over a boy. At a minimum, they cause confusion and insecurity. They almost always harm boys' and men's capacities for trust and intimacy.

A gay man who experienced sexual arousal when abused by a female may wonder whether it means that he is actually straight or wonder what it means that he was chosen by a woman or older girl.

Being sexually used or abused, whether by males or females, can cause a variety of other emotional and psychological problems. However, boys and men often don't recognize the connections between what happened and their later problems. To be used as a sexual object by a more powerful person, male or female, is never a good thing, and can cause lasting harm.

7. The myth that boys who are sexually abused will go on to abuse others.

This myth is especially dangerous because it can create terrible fear in boys and men. They may not only fear becoming abusers themselves, but that others will find out they were abused and believe they're a danger to children. Sadly, boys and men who tell of being sexually abused often are viewed more as potential perpetrators than as guys who need support.

While it is true that many (though by no means all) who sexually abuse children have histories of sexual abuse, it is NOT true that most boys who are sexually abused go on to sexually abuse others. The majority of boys do not go on to become sexually abusive

as adolescents or adults; even those who do perpetrate as teenagers, if they get help when they're young, usually don't abuse children when they become adults.

Some Final Points

- These are myths that everyone absorbs growing up, and continues to hear as adults, usually without even thinking about it. So of course some boys and men will, at least for a while, believe them and suffer the consequences.
- So long as societies believe these myths, and teach them to children from their earliest years, many men harmed by unwanted or abusive sexual experiences won't get the recognition and help they need.
- So long as boys or men harmed by unwanted or abusive sexual experiences believe these myths, they will feel ashamed and be less likely to seek whatever knowledge, understanding and help they need to achieve the lives they want and deserve.
- So long as boys, men, and society as a whole believes these myths and males don't get the help they need, males are more likely to join the minority who end up hurting others.
- And so long as these myths are believed, it increases the power of another devastating myth: that it was the child's fault. It is never the fault of the child in

a sexual situation - although some people are skilled at getting those they use or abuse to take on a responsibility that is always, and only, their own.

For any man harmed by unwanted or abusive sexual experiences - and anyone who wants to support him - becoming free of these myths is necessary to overcoming the effects of the abuse, and to achieving the life he wants and deserves.