



Why Don't They Tell?

Teens and Sexual Assault Disclosure

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Teen Sexual Assault

Sexual assault is any type of sexual activity or contact that happens without consent, and can take many different forms, including rape, attempted rape, sexual coercion, fondling or unwanted sexual touching, and any type of sexual contact with someone who cannot consent (such as someone who is underage or unable to respond).¹

Researchers² have documented that the traumatic effects of sexual assault may include:

- **Powerlessness:** having an ongoing sense of fear and vulnerability
- **Betrayal:** no longer being able to trust others' good intentions
- **Stigmatization:** feeling secrecy, shame and/or "damaged" related to the sexual assault
- **Traumatic sexualization:** associating sexuality and sexual behavior with fear, pain, and coercion rather than pleasure, intimacy, and choice.

Trauma from sexual assault can play a role in disclosure. Sexual assault remains the most underreported crime for teens as well as adults.³ In a representative national study of college women who had experienced rape or attempted rape, few (5%) reported the incident to law enforcement, citing that they did not want others to know, feared hostility from the police, feared reprisal by the assailant, or did not know how to report, among other reasons, although some reported to friends.⁴ Similar results were obtained in a 2016 Bureau of Justice Campus Climate Survey that showed low rates of reporting and the challenges related to disclosure.⁵

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Why Teens Don't Disclose Sexual Assault

Teen sexual assault is often not disclosed to anyone for many years. Some people may never disclose. When it happens, disclosure is often a process, not a single event. For example, an individual may first provide hints about an assault; if the response is supportive, then more information is shared. Over time, they may fully disclose the details of the event(s).

Common reasons for not disclosing sexual assault include not wanting family or other people to know, being unable to prove the incident occurred, fear that police will not take it seriously, or fear of police hostility.²

According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network⁶ and the Department of Justice National Sex Offender Public Website⁷, other reasons that teens do not disclose include:

- **Emotional pain:** trying to avoid thinking about, remembering, or talking about the sexual assault because it is emotionally painful.
- **Shame:** Sexual trauma is associated with a high degree of stigma in our society. Most teens are embarrassed for others to know that they experienced sexual violence. Not having been able to protect themselves during the assault causes many teens to feel weak, ashamed, or even that they deserved what happened. They may also fear being “slut-shamed” or criticized for real or alleged sexual behavior.
- **Fear of not being believed:** Even though sexual assault is a serious crime, it is often mischaracterized as consensual sex. Teen victims may fear not being believed about the assault, or worry that others will defend the perpetrator.
- **Fear of being blamed:** It is common for victims of sexual assault to face scrutiny regarding what they did to “cause” the incident, (e.g., what they were wearing, whether they were using drugs or alcohol, etc.) instead of focusing on their lack of consent.
- **Fear of punishment or reprisal:** Teens may avoid disclosing because they fear parental punishment for rule breaking (e.g., for having used drugs or alcohol prior to the assault, being out after curfew or in a location that is not allowed, or meeting people online). Teens may also fear reprisals from potentially violent perpetrators, or social ostracism by perpetrators who are popular as well as their friends.
- **Feeling partly responsible:** When the perpetrator is an acquaintance, victims are more likely to feel responsible for the assault and delay disclosing. Some teens may believe that they did something to contribute to the assault (e.g., if they had been sexually active with the perpetrator in the past, were flirting with the perpetrator prior to the assault, or were using drugs or alcohol when the sexual assault occurred). Such confusion and fear may diminish teens’ ability to recognize that the perpetrator is responsible and not them.
- **Other traumatic reactions:** Feeling shocked, dazed, confused, and/or not remembering some details of the event can be traumatic responses to the sexual assault. However, teens may fear that no one will believe them if they do not remember all the details, or they may not want to think or talk about the painful event.

- **Limits to confidentiality:** Teens are more aware than younger children that sexual assault is serious and that if they tell someone the authorities may be notified and become involved. This, combined with the above concerns, may keep many teens from disclosing a sexual assault.
- **Fear that nothing will be done:** Data indicate that fewer than 2% of reported incidents of sexual assault lead to successful prosecution of the perpetrator.
- **Cultural or religious reasons:** Cultural or religious beliefs may contribute to a teen's fears about punishment or ostracism. Cultural differences can also influence a teen's trust in various institutions (such as law enforcement), as well as how a family deals with a crisis.

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Benefits of Disclosure

Teens who experience sexual assault and its aftermath may have many compelling reasons for not disclosing. The individual holds the final authority over whether to disclose and if so, when, how, and to whom. For those who do choose to disclose, supports and benefits include:

- **Medical services:** Prompt medical examination provides teens with the potential for preserving forensic evidence of the assault, as well as early identification, prevention, or intervention related to sexually transmitted infection or pregnancy.
- **Mental health services:** Sexual assault is associated with potentially serious and long-lasting mental health consequences, including Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, substance use, and other problems, such as adverse effects on school performance or family and peer relationships. Evidence-based treatments are available to help teens recover and to prevent these long-term negative effects. More information is available at: <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/sexual-abuse/interventions>
- **Legal services:** Some teens and their families wish to pursue remedies within the legal system. Disclosure can be made at any time, but statutes of limitation restrict the time period for which legal options are available.



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Supporting Teen Disclosures after Sexual Assault

Support and protect teens by:

- **Having sexual health conversations:** Talk with teens about consent, non-coercion, honesty, shared values, protection, and pleasure as it relates to relationships and sexuality.
- **Encouraging honest and open communication:** Tell teens they can talk to you about difficult situations, and you will be available to help them even when they break a rule. Discuss hypothetical situations such as sexual assault, bullying, substance use, and other difficult scenarios so teens know you're comfortable with these kinds of conversations.

Talking about Sexual Health

More information is available at:

theharveyinstitute.com

projectconsent.com

childmind.org/article/how-talk-kids-sex-consent-boundaries

- **Educating yourself:** Read more about supporting teens after sexual assault, such as *Teen Sexual Assault: Information for Parents* available at: https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//teen_sexual_assault_parents.pdf. Other resources include:

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN):
www.rainn.org

Darkness to Light:
<https://www.d2l.org/>

Victims of Crime:
www.victimsofcrime.org

Teen Source:
<https://www.teensource.org/relationships/healthyrelationships>

That's Not Cool:
<https://thatsnotcool.com/>

Futures Without Violence:
<https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/>



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References

- ¹ <https://www.womenshealth.gov/relationships-and-safety/sexual-assault-and-rape/sexual-assault>
- ² Finkelhor, D & Browne, A. (1985). The traumatic impact of child sexual abuse: a conceptualization. *Am J Orthopsychiatry*, 55, 530-541.
- ³ http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc_factsheet_media_packet_statistics-about-sexual-violence_0.pdf
- ⁴ <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/182369.pdf>
- ⁵ <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ccsvsftr.pdf>
- ⁶ <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system>
- ⁷ <https://www.nsopw.gov/en/education/factsstatistics/?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1#disclosure>