What is Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)?
Child sexual abuse “occurs when a child is used as an object for the sexual gratification of an adult [or adolescent] through manipulation, exploitation, threats or physical force.” The abuser does not have to contact the child physically (e.g. rape, molest) for an act to be defined as CSA; acts such as photographing a child for pornography are also ways in which children are sexually abused. CSA usually occurs in the home with someone the child trusts. The most prevalent form of CSA is incest, when the abuser is related to the child.

Who is a CSA survivor?
A CSA survivor is someone who has been sexually abused as a child. The term “survivor” is used here as it emphasizes the strength it takes to endure the struggle of living with and healing from child sexual abuse.

- In the US, 1 in 4 girls is sexually abused before the age of 14, while 1 in 6 boys is sexually abused before the age of 16.
- CSA can happen to any child. Studies describe the parent-child relationship as the single most important factor in influencing the vulnerability of a child to sexual abuse. The risk of CSA increases with parental neglect, conflict, unavailability, and any factor that lessens parent-child communication and bonding.

What are the effects of CSA?
- **Shame:** Survivors associate guilt and shame with being sexually abused and need reassurance that the abuse was not their fault. They may need help sorting through their feelings if their abuser is someone they love and trusted, and this may lessen their ability to have healthy relationships after the abuse.
- **Memory loss:** Many survivors block memories of the abuse for years afterward. Usually the memories return when something triggers a flashback. Sensory triggers reawaken memories through a smell, touch, taste, sound or sight that the survivor associated with the abuse or the abuser. Other events such as the death of the abuse might trigger memories as well.
- **Physical effects:** Survivors experience isolation because they risk shame, fear and rejection for breaking the silence about the abuse. As a result, internalized pain, anger, and confusion often become vented in harmful ways, such as through self-destruction and suicidal ideation and/or tendencies.
- **Psychological effects:** Depression is a common result of CSA, as is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a temporary psychological disability comparable to the shock one experiences immediately after a traumatic experience, but coping mechanisms keep the survivor from experiencing the shock until months, years, or decades later.
- **Repeating the cycle:** Repeating the cycle: If the survivor does not seek professional help, it is possible that they might also become perpetrators of CSA.

Who commits CSA?
- Perpetrators are most commonly someone related to the child - their father, mother, sibling, aunt, etc.
- If not related to the child, a perpetrator is usually either a friend of the child’s family and/or a caretaker of the child. Perpetrators often use their authority and the child’s trust to manipulate and secure secrecy from the child, thereby protecting the abuser from being caught.
- Abusers can be people of all genders and abuse can be same-gender or different-gender abuse.
- Senior citizens and adolescents can also be perpetrators.
- Perpetrators are often themselves survivors of child sexual abuse.
What can I do?

*If I am a survivor of CSA*

• **Break the silence**: The first step in healing is being able to tell someone that you trust about the abuse.

• **Know your resources**: Knowledge is empowering, so look for websites, books, and organizations that will help you to learn about CSA. Consider seeking the services of a psychologist or social worker who can help you through the effects of CSA, such as depression, PTSD, suicidal feelings, or through the process of healing (such as telling your family about the abuse or confronting your perpetrator).

• **Find or create a support network**: A group of people whom you trust and rely on can offer support and encouragement during the struggle of healing from CSA. You might even look into joining a support group for survivors of CSA.

• **Find a safe outlet**: Write your feelings down in a diary, or take part in a hobby or a sport you enjoy.

• **Be your own friend**: The abuse you suffered was not your fault. Build positive inner thoughts and feelings towards yourself and find healthy ways of dealing with the abuse.

*If I want to help someone who tells me they were sexually abused*

• **Believe what they say**: Take the survivor seriously, and tell them that it wasn’t their fault.

• **Respect their confidentiality**: Unless they are at risk of hurting themselves or someone else, you must seek consent with the survivor before telling someone else about their abuse. The survivor must be able to stipulate the conditions of how much you can share, with whom, and whether you can reveal the survivor’s identity to others. Otherwise, the survivor may once again feel that they are being put in a vulnerable situation over which they have no control. Revealing that they are a survivor may also put them in danger if they are still in proximity to their abuser. If their friends and family do not already know, it remains the sole right of the survivor to tell them, if, when and how they choose to.

• **Seek support for yourself**: Supporting a survivor through the healing process is difficult. If you are supporting someone close to you through survival, particularly if you will be their main source of support (for example, if you are their partner, parent or sibling), consider seeking professional support for yourself as well.

• **Suggest resources**: Suggest resources and professional support for the survivor.

• **Educate yourself**: Seek out resources to help educate yourself so that you can supply the survivor with as much help as possible.

• **In case of emergency**: If a survivor is at risk of harming themselves or others, seek the help of a psychologist or professional in the field. If you witness an attempt at suicide or extreme acts of self-mutilation, call 911 immediately, as well as the psychologist of the survivor if they have one.

Where can I find more information?

**Orange County Child Protective Services**
714-940-1000
or 800-207-4464 (24-hour hotline, 7 days a week)

**From Darkness to Light**
“Seeks to reduce child sexual abuse nationally through education...aimed at adults.”
http://darkness2light.org

**Prevent Child Abuse California**
http://www.pca-ca.org/pca-ca

**Parenting Press**
“The best in child guidance, parent education, emotional competency and children’s safety books.”
http://www.parentingpress.com

**Campus Assault Resources and Education**
www.care.uci.edu

**Courage to Heal and Allies in Healing**
Books for survivors and their partners
Ellen Bass and Laura Davis
(Published by Harper Perennial)