



**rape and abuse
crisis center**

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Common Characteristics of Family Sexual Abuse

Family members are often enmeshed or over-involved.

- Loss of Boundaries: This often results in a loss of boundaries within the family, including a loss of physical, emotional, verbal, and sexual boundaries. Family members then become too involved in each other's lives. They often begin thinking, talking, and feeling for each other.
- Loss of physical boundaries: The sexual abuse may result from a loss of physical boundaries with tickling, touching, or physical closeness that was appropriate at a younger age. The continued loss of boundaries results in more touching and the touching often becomes more sexual. Boundaries to the outside world are often too closed, which results in family isolation. Family members look to the family too much to meet all their needs--emotional, physical, and sexual.

Families are often experiencing, or have experienced a period of high stress.

- Some examples are medical problems, financial problems, legal problems, problems with neighbors, extended family, etc., and marital problems.
- These issues have often drained family resources--time, energy, and money.

Families have often experienced sexual abuse in past generations.

- Often, the abuser, or the non-offending parent has experienced sexual abuse, or they may have a sibling who was abused. They have probably grown up in an enmeshed, isolated family, with some loss of boundaries.

Families often need to change the way members communicate with each other.

- Even for family members who feel close, they may not feel free to say what they think or express their feelings. Thoughts or feelings are often expressed indirectly and are often misunderstood.

24-hour Crisis Line (701)293-7273

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F: Education/Revised Handouts/Common Characteristics of Family Sexual Abuse

Families often need to change relationships which exist. Some examples of common problem relationships are:

- The husband/wife relationship often needs to be closer.
- The abuser/victim relationship often has been too close.
- The non-offending parent/victim relationship often needs to be closer.
- The victims often feel they do not belong with the rest of the siblings.

Sexual abuse offenders commonly have the following characteristics:

- They often have a high need to be in control.
- They have low self-esteem or don't feel as good about themselves as they could.
- They may feel uncomfortable in social situations.
- They may be impulsive.
- They feel misunderstood by others.

The non-offending parent commonly has the following characteristics:

- They find it difficult to be assertive.
- They need to feel more competent and confident.
- They need to be more independent.
- They feel tired, overwhelmed, or preoccupied.

The sexual abuse victim commonly has the following characteristics:

- They may be "caretakers," often functioning in a parent-like role.
- They may be self-destructive in a variety of ways, such as abusing drugs/alcohol/food, acting out sexually, and participating in dangerous behaviors.
- They feel guilty, ashamed, or at fault.
- Reporting is less likely if the perpetrator is a family member, uses threats, or is female.¹

Siblings commonly have the following characteristics:

- They blame the victim for the sexual abuse.
- They often blame the victim for the upheaval in the family.
- They may be jealous of the attention the victim gets.
- They may feel "left out" in the family system.

References:

North Dakota Alliance for Children's Justice, 2000.