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# Understanding What Makes Kids Vulnerable to Being Sexually Abused

**Children are by nature vulnerable to those more powerful than they are.**

Sexual abuse does not occur because of a particular quality in the child, but solely because of traits or decisions made on the part of the person abusing. Yet, if we can understand why some children may be more likely to be vulnerable to sexual abuse we can take steps early on to provide extra protection for those children. Although the child is never the reason for the abuse, there are factors that lower a child's defenses against abuse and make them less able to protect themselves or get the help they could need.

## Risk factors

The factors below can increase risk for abuse and are not necessarily considered to be causes of child sexual abuse; sexual abuse can occur without any of these factors present. These traits are not predictors or indicators of sexual abuse, but rather aspects of a child's life that can make them more vulnerable. When several of the factors below are true, a child may be less able to see a sexual violation as unacceptable, less able to find the resources to get protection, or perhaps even more willing to tolerate the sexual interaction in exchange for whatever it is they might be offered – protection, love, privileges, treats, friendship or money.

## Risk factors in a child's environment or household

- Settings where secrecy is frequently permitted or encouraged
- Significant stress in family (death, current divorce, or job loss)
- Children being viewed or talked about in adult sexual terms
- Exposure and/or easy access to adult pornography, X-rated media, or child pornography
- Witnessing situations where sex is exchanged for money, drugs, privileges or protection
- Instances of unacknowledged child sexual abuse in family history
- Alcohol abuse/misuse or illegal drug use in the home
- Domestic violence in the home
- Repeated exposure to other forms of violence
- Settings where there is little or no physical, emotional or sexual privacy

## Risk factors in a child's relationships

- Weak or absent ongoing connection to a trusted safe adult
- Child sees themselves as not deserving protection or respect
- Child feels emotionally isolated or neglected
- Little or no accurate information available about what constitutes healthy touching or safe sexual feelings/behaviors
- Developmental challenge or disability in the child or other family members
- Child is expected to fill the emotional or intimate needs of adults
- Child is a victim of physical or emotional abuse