

What are some characteristics of families in which incest occurs?

Families in which incest occurs often appear no different from other families. However, secrecy, isolation, and psychological stress are major parts of family life. Children in these families commonly feel guilty about the abuse they suffer, not understanding that it comes from choices made by the adult abuser.

Abusers come from all races, religious groups, income levels, professions, and age groups. They may enjoy good reputations in their communities and seem quite normal. In reality abusers are emotionally distressed, isolated, and immature. They have false or distorted ideas about sexuality and often believe that there is nothing wrong with their abusive behavior.

Some abusers, particularly male abusers, tend to think that they have a right to control the family and behave in a forceful manner. Other abusers get power by appearing helpless and needy, pressuring their victims to take care of their needs and feel sorry for them.

A non-abusive mother in the family usually gives her children the feeling that she is unable to influence what happens in the family. She may be overworked, ill much of the time, depressed, economically dependent, and/or cut off from social contact outside the family.

STATEWIDE SEXUAL ASSAULT CRISIS
RESPONSE HOTLINE
1-800-977-5776

**Arkansas Coalition Against
Sexual Assault**

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***Sexual
Abuse
Within the
Family:
Incest***



What is incest?

Incest is any sexual contact between a child or adolescent and a person which is closely related, including step-parents and live-in partners of parents. The person initiating contact is usually a parent or step-parent, most often male. Incest perpetrators also include siblings, cousins, mothers, uncles, aunts, and grandparents. The activity may happen once or many times over a period of years. Such activity is illegal.



What problems might incest create for children?

Young children may exhibit one or more of the following problems:

- Nightmares and other sleep disturbances
- Reverting to bed-wetting, clinging, or whining
- Sexual knowledge, behavior, or language unusual for their age
- Withdrawal from other people
- Frequent genital or bowel movement problems

- Unexplained gagging
- Agitation, hyperactivity, irritability
- Aggressiveness
- Loss of appetite

Older children may exhibit one or more of the following problems:

- Depression
- Withdrawal
- Poor self-image
- Substance abuse
- Running away or fear of going home
- Repeated physical complaints such as infections, cramping or abdominal pains
- Muscle aches
- Dizziness, gagging and severe headaches
- Self-destructive or mutilating behaviors
- Skipping school
- Change in school performance
- Seductive or promiscuous behaviors and/or prostitution

How do abused children handle their abuse?

Incest creates much mental and physical stress for victimized children. They are forced to develop unusual methods of maintaining a small sense of security and control during abusive situations, including:

- Separating themselves from the experience by blanking out, or by being somewhere else in their minds during the abuse

- Making certain parts of their bodies numb or deadened to pain, or creating pain to distract them from the pain of the abuse (biting their lips or holding their breath)
- Using alcohol or drugs to numb themselves to emotional and physical pain during or after the abuse
- Pretending to be asleep during the abuse and making their bodies go limp

Some children may respond sexually to the abuse as a way of getting relief from the tension it created. This may cause feelings of guilt and confusion later on.

What should I do if I suspect that a child is being victimized by incest?

Anyone who suspects that a child is being abused in any way should report those suspicious to the Department of Human Services or a local law enforcement agency. The statewide child abuse hotline telephone number is 1-800-422-6641.

You Can Help Break the Silence