

## Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse

Reporting on child sexual abuse (CSA) presents a number of challenges. The victims—children from birth to 17 years of age—are often traumatized by the experience and afraid to come forward. CSA may cause a wide variety of emotional and behavioral problems that make it difficult even for adult survivors to discuss their victimization because of the trauma, shame, and grief associated with the crime. Reporters should be aware of these issues and understand that child victims' accounts may be less cohesive and polished than those of adults. Despite such challenges, victims' perspectives should be included in stories about CSA, so that the public learns about the complex issues involved and the important impact of these crimes on society.

### **The Basics-**

#### **Important Context for Reporting on CSA:**

- The child is a *victim*. The child's involvement with an adult offender should never be considered consensual or consenting.
- The power imbalance between the adult abuser and child victim presents a number of complexities in reporting on the crime:
- When the victim is the only witness to the abuse, adults may question the child's testimony.
- Because perpetrators are often known to the victim and his or her family, it may be difficult for the child to come forward and painful for the family to hear or believe the victim's account of the crime.
- Victims who disclose the abuse may face anger, disagreement, and even rejection within the family and community which increase their guilt and shame.
- Child CSA victims are often vulnerable and frightened. Their stories may appear inconsistent, and may emerge in bits and pieces. This pattern is normal for a child who has experienced this kind of trauma and attempts to recount it for an adult;
- Adult CSA survivors may face misunderstanding and misjudgments when they finally confront and disclose their abuse. Listeners may forget that although the survivor is now an adult, he or she was a child (with a child's status and capacities) at the time of the abuse.

News stories that report on these issues may cause the victim to be re-victimized by reading or hearing about the case. CSA is often referred to as a "silent crime" because victims have difficulty coming forward. Non-offending adults are often complicit in not reporting the abuse, and perpetrators—who are often trusted by the child or known in the community—can manipulate situations so that they can continue the abuse. In addition, the abuse is often not physically apparent; rather, the evidence of abuse may manifest itself in behavioral and psychological changes that can be misidentified as moodiness or disobedience.

For victims, the act of coming forward takes great strength and courage. Child welfare experts agree that false accusations of CSA are rare. When a child does disclose abuse, we should begin by believing