

Teen Sexuality Within a History of Sexual Abuse

Today's post is taken from [Parenting Adopted Adolescents: Understanding and Appreciating Their Journeys](#) by Gregory C. Keck, Ph.D. Dr. Keck is the founder and director of the [Attachment and Bonding Center of Ohio](#) as well as the co-author of [Adopting the Hurt Child](#) and [Parenting the Hurt Child](#). He is the father of two sons adopted as adolescents. This blog is used with permission of NavPress. All rights reserved www.navpress.com.

In Chapter 6, *Just When You Thought It Couldn't Get Any Worse: Physical and Sexual Development, Sexuality and Sexual Behavior*, Dr. Keck writes,

If an adolescent has been victimized by sexual abuse—either early in life prior to adoption or since adoption—the onset of puberty might be more complicated than it would be for the typically developing child. Premature exposure to sex and sexually related issues often results in intense responses to the physical and psychological changes that occur. It is important to remember that individuals who have been sexualized have had sexual awareness for a long period of time, and surging hormones may lead to intense impulses that are difficult to manage effectively.

Children who have been sexualized often relate to adults and peers in a sexual manner. They tend to see themselves as being sexual and may actively seek sexual encounters—almost as a way to gain some mastery over what was once out of their control. Some children who have been sexualized by adults have a sense that the activity felt good to them, and it may have. This complicates the issue for two primary reasons: It leads the child to think that he caused his abuse, and it leads him to believe that he should continue engaging in such activities with others because it generates a pleasurable feeling.

Even when the actual abuse ends—usually when the child is removed from the birth family or orphanage—the reality of it does not. It is replayed over and over again in thoughts, feelings, sensory experiences, and, in some cases, with other children. When abused children reach puberty, they often experience a surge of sexual feelings. Faced with an increasing libido, the adolescent who has already had many sexual experiences is likely to seek sexual activity. He may put himself in high-risk situations in which he might be victimized again. Because he has had many sexual experiences prior to adolescence, he does not have much fear about doing what he's done before. He has defined himself as a sexual being, and his sexuality—his identity—is the result of earlier sexual behavior.

Sometimes sexual abuse drives adolescent sexual activity. Many boys who have been abused by male perpetrators feel that they may be homosexual—a belief further reinforced if the sexual activities felt good physically. The fear of being homosexual may drive them to try to conquer as many girls as possible, just to prove to themselves and others that they are not gay. They are preoccupied with sexual matters, and they may have histories of perpetrating against others throughout childhood and adolescence. This preoccupation clearly interferes with the adolescent's capacity to complete the developmental tasks required of him.

Boys who have been sexualized by older girls or women will also face complications in adolescence. They may be completely uncomfortable with females and, as a result, might find that their sexual identities are in a constant state of confusion.

Often girls who have been sexually abused by males feel disgusted about sex and anything associated with boys or men. They may identify themselves as being bisexual or exclusively attracted to females. Yet other girls who are abused by men seem almost driven to be sexually promiscuous throughout adolescence and perhaps into adulthood. Girls who have been abused by their mothers or other women are equally confused and driven to wonder about what experiences mean in terms of their own sexuality.

Parenting an adolescent with a history of sexual abuse requires absolute vigilance of emerging sexual issues. Some studies suggest that about 30 percent of children who were sexually abused repeat

perpetrating behavior. The good news, then, is that 70 percent do not continue the pattern. However, there may be an increased likelihood that the adolescent who has had sexual experiences in childhood will become sexually active.

Parents must take an active role in the adolescent's life when there are concerns that sexual activity is on the horizon. Although parents can't always prevent sexual activity, they *can* address the issue long before adolescence, just as they do other critical issues, such as the use of alcohol and drugs. Ongoing discussions about the importance of abstinence should be referenced from as many perspectives as possible. This may offer psychological immunization that will pay off when the adolescent finally hits those hormonally driven years.

A strong parental stance may allow the adolescent to feel comfortable about choosing not to engage in sexual activity. Many adolescents feel rescued from peer pressure when their parents have discussed and explored the many facets of sexual development. They can always use Mom and Dad as the reason why they can't do anything sexual, as in, "My parents would kill me if I did anything like that! I think they must have GPS connected to me because I get caught every time I do something they don't approve of."

Adoptees may fear rejection by a boyfriend or girlfriend if they do not do what seems to be expected, so in an effort to be accepted, they may engage in sexual activities against their better judgment. To help diffuse these situations, it would be helpful for them to have a repertoire of responses to offer a persistent suitor. Parents might discuss some options with their children—again, well in advance of adolescence. The children may dismiss the parents' suggestions as "stupid," but their advice just might come in handy in the future if such a situation arises.

Parenting Adopted Adolescents includes information about teen sexuality, identity formation, challenging behavior, turning 18, the clinician's role, the viability of adopting an adolescent and much more! If you are parenting a teen or want to get a jump start on those approaching teen years, this book is a must have!