

Sexual Assault Legal Institute

# Understanding the Legal System When Your Child Has Been Sexually Abused



**SALI**  
Sexual Assault Legal Institute

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If you have any type of case involving child sexual abuse, you are strongly encouraged to consult with an attorney.

MCASA appreciates Lisae C. Jordan, Esq., and Melissa McDermott Lane, LCSW-C, the authors of this booklet, and the staff of the Sexual Assault Legal Institute for legal updates on subsequent editions.



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## Introduction

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Child sexual abuse occurs when a person engages in activity with a child to meet their own sexual urges. It is not a love relationship; rather the child is being used for the offender's sexual pleasure. Sexual offenders can be children, teenagers, or adults. They can be male or female and are typically not strangers to the child or their family. Boys and girls are both victimized. Because so many people do not report child sexual abuse, it's difficult to know how frequent it is, but most estimates are that about 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys are sexually abused before they are 18 years old.<sup>1</sup>

You are most likely reading this booklet because your child has been sexually abused. This may be a time full of whirling and bombarding emotions, possibly confusion, anger, frustration, helplessness, shock, loneliness, to name but a few.

Because so many people do not report child sexual abuse, it's difficult to know how frequent it is, but most estimates are that 1 in 10 children are sexually abused before they are 18 years old.<sup>2</sup>

When a child discloses sexual abuse, it may throw an entire family into crisis. You and your family may be well-equipped to deal with day-to-day problems, however you may not be as well-equipped to deal with the knowledge that your child has been abused. You may be dealing with a new system of professionals, such as: Child Protective Services (CPS), police, medical, and legal systems. You may also be responding to the behaviors and emotions related to your child's disclosure, the investigative and legal process, and/or the sexual abuse. Facing all this may challenge every resource you have.

This booklet gives basic information about how the legal system responds to allegations of child sexual abuse. It is important that you ask questions and find help as you and your child travel through this process.

1. Townsend, C., Rheingold, A., & Haviland, M. L. (2016) "Estimating a Child Sexual Abuse Prevalence Rate for Practitioners: An Updated Review of Child Sexual Abuse Prevalence Studies," *Darkness to Light*.  
2. Ibid.

## Emotional Recovery

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Many people prefer to take care of their own problems, worries, and troubles, but when your child has been abused, the stress of the experience (disclosure and investigation), and the negative effects of the abuse, really need to be discussed with a trained counselor or therapist.

The stress of victimization and disclosure affects all members of the family.

## Every Child is Different

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Not every child experiences sexual abuse the same way; some children will have few effects, while others may experience many. Counseling is designed to resolve the problems caused by abuse and works toward preventing future problems.

Counseling may not be a "one-shot thing." Your child may successfully work through all the current issues. However, later on, as they grow older and enter different developmental stages (e.g. adolescence, young adulthood, parenthood), new issues may arise and counseling should be sought again.



## Counseling for Brothers and Sisters And You

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Counseling should not just be considered for your child, who has been victimized, but also for their siblings, and yourself. The stress of victimization and disclosure affects all members of the family.

## Effects of Child Sexual Abuse

The degree of trauma and the effects of child sexual abuse are not the same for every child. Some typical effects include one or more of the following.



Some children experience **emotional effects:**

- feelings of guilt, shame, anxiety
- feeling depression or grief
- repressed anger
- impaired ability to trust
- blind trust — trusting anyone
- blocked feelings — feeling numb

Some children experience **behavioral effects:**

- withdrawing from friends and family
- destroying property
- using alcohol or drugs
- acting out

Some children experience **physical effects:**

- injuries
- pregnancy
- sexually transmitted diseases
- changes in eating or sleeping patterns

Some children experience **cognitive effects (effects on thinking and understanding):**

- shortened attention span
- concentration difficulties
- school problems
- low self-esteem
- helpless victim mentality

Some children experience **sexual effects:**

- being re-victimized
- victimizing others
- being sexually overactive

## Who Commits Sexual Abuse?

Most children are sexually abused by someone they know. About 90% of those that sexually abuse a child are acquaintances of either the child or the family, while roughly 10% of sexual abuse is perpetrated by a stranger.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 30% of children who are sexually abused are abused by family members.<sup>2</sup>

There is NO psychological test that can tell whether someone is a child molester. John E.B. Myers, an expert on child abuse, wrote an excellent resource, *A Mother's Nightmare - Incest: A Practical Legal Guide for Parents and Professionals* (Sage 1997). Myers quotes researchers Nicholas and Molinder, who explain that “No test, no device, has the power to pick out a sexually deviant person from any other person in a crowd.” Even the clinical interviews used in some custody evaluations cannot prove or disprove someone is a molester. There simply is no “typical” child molester profile.

Experts estimate that only **10%** of perpetrators are strangers – the rest are family members or acquaintances.

Perpetrators of child sexual abuse rarely abuse children in a sudden attack. Most spend time with the child — and the child’s family members — to earn their trust. This “grooming” can include giving a child gifts, sharing private secrets, tempting a child to break rules, or taking actions a child may find threatening. Grooming is designed to keep a child from disclosing the abuse and keep the molestation a secret.

Perpetrators of child sexual abuse rarely abuse children in a sudden attack

1. Finkelhor, D. Characteristics of crimes against juveniles. Durham, NH: Crimes against Children Research Center (2012)  
2. Ibid.

## Disclosing Child Sexual Abuse

Most children do not report sexual abuse immediately after it happens. Child molesters manipulate victims to discourage them from telling anyone. This can be as obvious as a direct threat, such as “I’ll hurt your family if you tell,” or be more subtle, such as bribing or isolating a child. When children do disclose, the way they tell someone varies. Some children tell a friend or adult directly, but others reveal the abuse by accident. Other children talk about abuse indirectly. They might hint at a problem situation, but not talk about it directly. For example, they may say to an adult, “Don’t let my sister wear a dress to Grandpa’s house.” Some children try to bargain with the person they are telling with a comment such as “I have something to tell you, but you have to promise not to tell anyone.”

“I have something to tell you, but you have to promise not to tell anyone.”

The first time a child tells someone about abuse, she or he often does not disclose everything that happened. It is also very common for children to later retract their first statements, particularly as stress from the legal system or family disruption occurs.

## Should I Question My Child About What Happened?

It is natural to want to question a child about what happened to them. Do NOT do this. Parents or other caretakers who question their children about sexual abuse risk being accused of “coaching” the child.

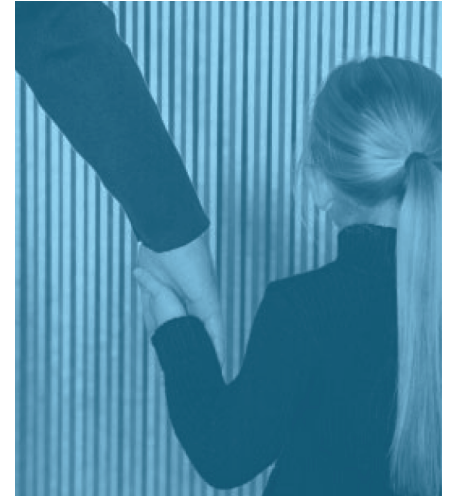


If you suspect abuse, get your child to a neutral, objective professional as quickly as possible.

## The Legal System in Child Abuse Cases

The legal system can be very confusing to people who don’t work in it and even more confusing when child sexual abuse is involved.

As a parent or other adult who wants to protect a child victim, you may feel that the issue of abuse is clear and that the perpetrator should simply have no contact with the child-victim and be jailed. The courts, however, must remain neutral until a case is decided. Courts must protect the rights of people accused of child sexual abuse and also protect victims. This can be extremely frustrating for a victim and their family members.



## One Child, Many Cases

Different issues are decided in different types of cases. An allegation of child sexual abuse may involve all or some of these:

- Child Protective Services (CPS) investigation — if no adult is protecting a child this can lead to a Child In Need of Assistance (CINA) case against parents or guardians
- Criminal case
- Protective or Peace Order case
- Family Law case (custody, divorce, visitation)
- Tort case (a lawsuit seeking money or other damages)

Each of these may involve different judges, lawyers, and parties.



## Sexual Abuse – A Legal Term

Courts and lawyers sometimes use words in special ways. One of the more confusing terms in the law is “sexual abuse of a minor” or “child sexual abuse.”

“Sexual abuse” of a child does not cover every situation where a child is sexually molested or exploited. In Maryland, the definition of sexual abuse of a minor is more specific. In sexual molestation or exploitation cases, sexual abuse of a minor means that the person committing the molestation had a particular relationship with the child and was a:

- parent;
- household or family member;
- person who has permanent or temporary care or custody of the child;
- person who has responsibility for supervision of a child; or
- person who, because of the person’s position or occupation, exercises authority over the child.

If other people, such as strangers, sexually molest a child, they can still be charged with a crime for the sexual touching, but the crime is not called “sexual abuse of a minor” and there are differences in how the legal system responds.

In sex trafficking cases, it is “sexual abuse” when *any individual* commits sex trafficking of a child.



**“Sexual abuse” of a child is NOT just that a person sexually molests or exploits a child.**

## Child Protective Services

### *When Does Child Protective Services Investigate?*

Child Protective Services (CPS) is part of the state government and has the authority to investigate when certain types of child abuse or neglect are suspected, including sexual abuse. If CPS finds that a child is at risk of harm, it can ask the Court to order that a child be removed from the home and placed in foster care.

The term “sexual abuse” was defined in the previous section. It is helpful to understand this special definition because when “sexual abuse” of a minor is alleged, only then will Child Protective Services become involved. In other words, if the child molester is related to, lives with, or has responsibility for the child-victim, then CPS will investigate. If they find child sexual abuse occurred, CPS will take steps to make sure that the perpetrator no longer has access to the child and the child is safe.

If the child molester is NOT someone who is related to, lives with, or has responsibility for the child-victim, then CPS will NOT become involved.

**Examples:** CPS would investigate if the child molester was a parent, babysitter, parent’s live-in boyfriend or girlfriend, grandparent, or other family member.

**Examples:** CPS would not investigate if the child molester was a stranger, a neighbor who was not taking care of the child, or a friend of the family who was not babysitting or supervising the child.

## Child Advocacy Centers

Communities in Maryland have “child advocacy centers” (CACs). These are organizations where child protective services, police, prosecutors, social workers, and other service providers work together on child sexual abuse cases. Some CACs are called “the Child Advocacy Center,” but others have different names, such as “The Listening Place” in Howard County. CACs are one-stop shops that aim to minimize the number of times a child is interviewed, help ensure that people working on child sexual abuse cases have specialized training, and offer additional supportive services.

## After the Child Protective Services Investigation

When CPS investigates an allegation of child sexual abuse, a social worker or other caseworker tries to determine what really happened. At the end of an investigation, CPS will make one of three statements about the abuse:

- “RULED OUT” – this means the investigation showed abuse did NOT occur. For example, CPS may have learned that the alleged abuser was out of town when the abuse supposedly occurred.
- “INDICATED” – this means there is “credible evidence” that the abuse did occur.
- “UNSUBSTANTIATED” – this is the trickiest term. It means that CPS could not determine what happened – there was “insufficient evidence” to make a finding either way. It does NOT mean that the abuse did not happen, just that at the time of the CPS investigation, they could not make a decision. Many times, more evidence will come to light later and abuse can be proved in another type of case (for example, a Family Law or Criminal Case).

## CPS and Criminal Cases

The CPS investigation is separate from any Criminal Case. The report that CPS believes child sexual abuse is “indicated” does not mean that the perpetrator will be convicted of a crime (or vice versa).

## CPS and Family Law and Protective Order Cases

In Family Law and Protective Order Cases, the CPS report is only one piece of evidence the judge may consider when deciding whether sexual abuse occurred.

## Criminal Cases

This section provides a brief overview of the criminal process. For additional help understanding these issues, contact the Sexual Assault Legal Institute at 301-565-2277 or visit the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MCASA) at [www.mcasa.org](http://www.mcasa.org).

### *The Role of the Victim in Criminal Cases*

Criminal cases are cases by the government against the alleged perpetrator. Prosecutors represent the State of Maryland, not the victim. Victims are witnesses in these cases, not “parties.” Good prosecutors consider the wishes of the victim-witness, but also must consider whether they can prove their case and the seriousness of the crime. This can lead prosecutors to dismiss some cases against the wishes of a victim or to go forward in cases where the victim asks to have the charges dropped.

Victims and their families are not required to speak with attorneys for the defendant (perpetrator). If you are contacted by an investigator, be sure you know who they are working for before you decide whether to speak with them. Consult with your own lawyer (or the prosecutor if you don’t have a lawyer) if you have any questions. The Sexual Assault Legal Institute provides lawyers for victims of child sexual abuse or other sex crimes in some cases. Contact SALI at 301-565-2277 for additional information.



### *Victim Address Confidentiality*

From the very beginning of a case, ask the police, prosecutor, and court to keep your address confidential. Even if the perpetrator knows where you live, address confidentiality can help protect you from invasion of privacy.

## Victim Notification Form

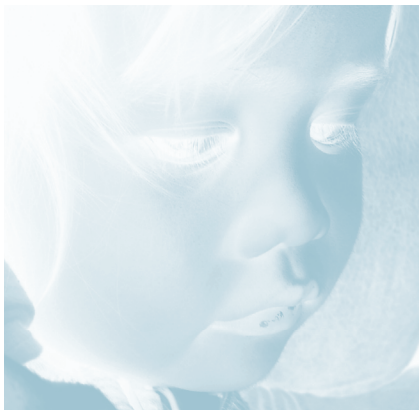
It is vital that you file a “Crime Victim Notification Request and Demand for Rights” form as soon as a case is indicted. These should be mailed to you or provided by the State’s Attorney’s Office. Ask for one if you are not provided with one.

It is vital that you file a “Crime Victim Notification Request and Demand for Rights” form as soon as a case is indicted.

## HIV Testing

Maryland law permits victims of sex crimes who were potentially exposed to HIV to apply for an emergency order for testing within 72 hours of the exposure. The victim can request this emergency order directly from the court. Victims are also able to request that the perpetrator be tested for HIV or Hepatitis C. To request testing of the perpetrator, the victim submits a written request to the prosecutor. Victims are encouraged to quickly seek help from one of the legal resources listed at the back of this booklet if they wish to pursue HIV or Hepatitis C testing.

## Privacy Issues



Some minors, particularly teens, may have mental health or other records they wish to keep confidential. It is important to contact a victim’s attorney (such as those at the Sexual Assault Legal Institute - SALI) if this is a concern. Prosecutors do not represent the victim, they represent the government, so they may not be able or willing to help protect these records.

## Issuing Charges

In criminal child sexual abuse cases, the police generally investigate and decide whether to ask the court to charge someone. However, citizens can also ask the court to charge someone by filing an “application for statement of charges” with a court commissioner.

Commissioners issue charges if there is “probable cause” to believe a crime occurred. In sex crimes cases, charges also may be presented to a grand jury. If the grand jury believes that a crime occurred, they will issue an indictment. In some cases, charges first come from the commissioner and then the prosecutor presents the case to a grand jury.



## Names of Sex Crimes

There are different names for sex crimes; for instance, “rape in the 2nd degree” or “sexual offense in the 4th degree.” What crime is charged depends on several things, including:

- What the sexual conduct was (vaginal intercourse, anal intercourse, oral sex, penetration with an object, fondling)
- Age of the victim and offender
- Whether the victim was intoxicated, physically or mentally impaired, or unconscious
- Relationship between the victim and perpetrator
- Whether weapons or extreme violence were used
- Exploitation of a minor (for example, child pornography)

A list of all sex crimes can be found at [www.mcasa.org](http://www.mcasa.org) under the section, Laws & Public Policy.



## Juvenile Offenders

35% of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by juveniles.<sup>1</sup>

When the perpetrator of a crime is a juvenile (under 18), sometimes the case starts in the juvenile justice system. However, a prosecutor may ask to move the case to adult court. In other cases, the perpetrator may be charged as an adult but ask to be “waived” into the juvenile court.

The most important factors the legal system considers when deciding if an offender will be tried as a juvenile or an adult are the type of crime (for instance, rape with a weapon will be treated differently than fondling) and the record of the alleged perpetrator.



The goals of the juvenile justice system are very different than the goals of the adult criminal justice system. Juvenile court seeks to rehabilitate and reform the perpetrator, not to punish. The juvenile justice system reviews cases periodically and may change a “sentence” at any of these reviews. Perpetrators in a juvenile justice facility are released when they turn 21.

## Pre-Trial

Most defendants charged with a serious sex crime or child sexual abuse are arrested. After arrest, a defendant may be released on bail. In a small number of cases, the courts may refuse to grant bail, but this is rare.

When a defendant is released on bail, the court may impose “conditions of release.” In child sexual abuse cases, these conditions should include that the defendant stay away from the victim.

***Suggestion: Talk with the prosecutor in your case about what conditions of release are needed to keep the child-victim safe.***

1. Finkelhor, D., Ormrod, R., & Chaffin, M. (2009). Juveniles Who Commit Sex Offenses Against Minors. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*.

## Plea-Bargains

Many criminal cases do not go to trial; they end with a “plea-bargain.” The perpetrator agrees to plead guilty in return for a deal on sentencing. In child sexual abuse cases, these types of deals can help child-victims by keeping them off the witness stand and sparing them the trauma and uncertainty of trial.



Many prosecutors will consider a victim’s wishes when deciding whether to agree to plea bargain, but the final decision is up to the prosecutor and the defendant. The victim cannot veto a plea agreement.

***Suggestion: It is important to communicate with the prosecutor’s office about what you and the victim believe would be the best outcome. Most prosecutors’ offices have victim-witness coordinators who can help you with this; however, these coordinators work for the State, not for the victim-witness. You may wish to consider obtaining an crime victim’s rights attorney for the child-victim.***

## Criminal Trials: Standard of Proof

In criminal cases, the State has the burden to prove that a crime occurred and the “defendant” (the alleged child molester) is presumed innocent. A jury or judge decides if the evidence proves “beyond a reasonable doubt” that the crime occurred. If this is proved, the defendant is convicted.

In criminal cases, the State has the burden to prove that a crime occurred, and the “defendant” (the alleged child molester) is presumed innocent.

## Criminal Trials: Testimony via Closed Circuit Television

In some cases, a child would become too upset or would be emotionally harmed by being in the same room as the perpetrator. If the court finds that the child-victim would suffer “serious emotional distress such that



the child victim cannot reasonably communicate,” the court can permit the child to testify via closed circuit television. The court must hold a hearing about how a child would be harmed before ordering this type of testimony. (Criminal Procedure section 11-303.)

## Criminal Trials: Hearsay – What a Child Said

One of the most frustrating aspects of criminal child sexual abuse cases has to do with “hearsay.” Rules regarding hearsay can sometimes – but not always – prevent witnesses from telling a jury what a child has said about child sexual abuse. This area of the law is complicated and changing. You may want to talk with the prosecutor about whether this is an issue in your case. Sometimes hearsay rules lead prosecutors to enter plea bargains or dismiss cases, particularly if the child-victim will not testify.



## Sentencing

Sentencing is decided by the judge who presided over the trial. Victims have the right to submit a “victim impact statement” to the court to help the judge understand the effects of the sexual abuse on the victim. These statements can be written or oral or both. A victim representative (typically a family member) can present this statement for a child. Victim impact statements are also considered if a defendant is up for parole (early release from prison).

***Suggestion: Prepare a written victim impact statement to submit to the court and also attend sentencing in person to tell the court about the impact of the abuse. (See the list of Recommended Resources at the end of this booklet for help in preparing these.)***

In addition to jail time or probation, sentencing can include conditions of probation such as an order that the perpetrator not contact the victim or that the perpetrator attend sex offender treatment. Convicted perpetrators can also be ordered to pay “restitution” to victims for expenses related to the crime.



***Suggestion: Keep documentation of all expenses related to the abuse (counseling, medical care, etc.) and provide copies to the prosecutor so she or he can ask for restitution. Talk to the prosecutor about this as soon as possible and definitely before a trial or plea bargain.***

***Suggestion: Let the prosecutor know if you want the perpetrator to be ordered to stay away or for the court to impose other conditions of release.***

## Criminal Appeals

After the trial in a case is completed, defendants may appeal their conviction or sentence. Appeals can be based on what evidence was or was not heard, or on a variety of other issues.

The victim will not have to testify at an appeal, but sometimes the appeals court will order that the defendant be released or the trial be done over. Most appeals must be filed 30 days after the end of a case, but some “post-conviction” proceedings do not have that time limit.



If a perpetrator is incarcerated, the victim (or any other person) can register with VINE (Victim Information Notification Everyday).

## Notification of Release from Jail

### Register with VINE

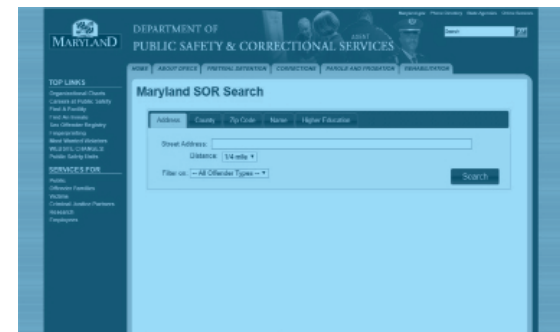
If a perpetrator is incarcerated, the victim (or any other person) can register with VINE (Victim Information Notification Everyday), a service that allows a victim to check on the status of the offender and notifies the victim of the offender’s release or transfer, including release pending appeal. Notification can be by phone or e-mail.

Call 1-866-634-8463 or visit [www.vinelink.com](http://www.vinelink.com) to register for VINE in Maryland. You should also complete a Crime Victim Notification Request and Demand for Rights form.

## Monitoring of Sex Offenders Who Have Been Convicted

If, and only if, a sex offender was convicted of certain crimes, they will be monitored after conviction. “Parole” is when an offender is released from incarceration early subject to certain restrictions. An inmate may be eligible for parole after serving anywhere from one-third to one-half of a sentence. “Probation” is part of a sentence and is imposed by the judge when the defendant is convicted. Some offenders might be sentenced to probation without even spending time in jail. Violent and repeat sex offenders are required to submit to lifetime sex offender supervision, which can include requirements like GPS monitoring, restrictions on living near schools and working with minors, participation in a treatment program, or regular polygraph examinations.

Some sex offenders must also “register.” The sex offender registry provides members of the public with information about who has been convicted of certain sex crimes. The registry is online at <http://www.dpscs.state.md.us/sorSearch>. The most important thing to remember about the registry is that **most sex offenders are NOT on the registry.**



The sex offender registry provides members of the public with information about who has been convicted of sex crimes.  
<http://www.dpscs.state.md.us/sorSearch>



## Peace Orders and Protective Orders

Peace Orders and Protective Orders are both types of emergency orders that can help protect someone from certain types of crimes, including sexual offenses. Both have the same basic process:



1. A victim (or parent or guardian if the victim is a child) goes to court and fills out a form under oath explaining to the judge what has happened. If the courts are closed, the victim can go to the commissioner's office – they are open 24 hours a day. A victim seeking a Protective Order can also fill out this form and file electronically from a location approved by the court, such as a Child Advocacy Center, a hospital where the victim is receiving treatment, or at a sexual assault, domestic violence, or human trafficking prevention or assistance program.
2. If the judge finds there is reasonable cause to believe that the acts occurred, a temporary order is issued. (If the victim went to a commissioner, an "interim order" is issued and a hearing for a "temporary order" is set within a few days. If the victim filed electronically, they would attend a hearing through video conferencing.)
3. If child sexual abuse is alleged, Child Protective Services will conduct an emergency investigation. (See previous discussion of special definition of "child sexual abuse" on page 10.)
4. The temporary order is served on the other party.
5. After the temporary order is served, the court holds a hearing and the victim must prove what happened, which includes them testifying.
6. The court decides whether to issue a final order.

## Comparing Peace and Protective Orders

| PROTECTIVE ORDERS  | PEACE ORDERS  |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Who is eligible?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current and former spouses</li> <li>• Persons who have had a sexual relationship at any time and have lived together for at least 90 days within 1 year before filing</li> <li>• Persons related to the respondent by blood, marriage, or adoption</li> <li>• A parent, stepparent, child, or stepchild</li> <li>• Vulnerable adult</li> <li>• Individual who has a child in common with the respondent</li> <li>• A person who has had a sexual relationship with the respondent within the past year</li> <li>• A person who is petitioning based on a rape or other sex offense that occurred within the past 6 months</li> </ul> | <p><b>Who is eligible?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anyone who is NOT eligible for a protective order, but who is a victim of abuse.</li> <li>• Employers petitioning on behalf of an employee in some circumstances.</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>How is abuse defined?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Act that causes serious bodily harm</li> <li>• Act that places the petitioner in fear of imminent serious bodily harm</li> <li>• Assault</li> <li>• Rape or sexual offense</li> <li>• False imprisonment</li> <li>• Stalking</li> <li>• Revenge porn</li> <li>• Child Abuse or Vulnerable Adult Abuse</li> </ul>  | <p><b>How is abuse defined?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Act that causes serious bodily harm</li> <li>• Act that places the petitioner in fear of imminent serious bodily harm</li> <li>• Assault</li> <li>• False imprisonment</li> <li>• Harassment</li> <li>• Stalking</li> <li>• Trespassing</li> <li>• Malicious destruction of property</li> <li>• Misuse of telephone facilities and equipment</li> <li>• Misuse of electronic communication or interactive computer service</li> <li>• Revenge porn</li> <li>• Visual surveillance</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Which court?</b><br/>Circuit or District Court (or commissioners if courts are closed)</p>   | <p><b>Which court?</b><br/>Only District Court (or commissioners if courts are closed)</p>  |



# Comparing Peace and Protective Orders

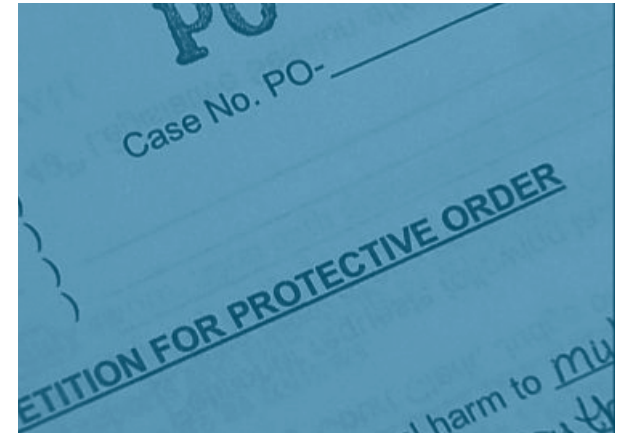
| PROTECTIVE ORDERS   | PEACE ORDERS   |
|---|--|
| <p><b>How soon after an act must a petitioner file for a protective order?</b></p> <p>There are no limits in the law, as long as the parties still have the required relationship. In other situations, a judge might not look favorably on a delay in reporting.</p>   | <p><b>How soon after an act must a petitioner file for a peace order?</b></p> <p>The act must have occurred within 30 days of filing the petition.</p>   |
| <p><b>What kinds of relief are available?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refrain from contacting, attempting to contact, or harassing victim</li> <li>• Refrain from entering the residence of the victim</li> <li>• Vacate family home</li> <li>• Remain away from victim’s employment, school, or temporary residence</li> <li>• Remain away from child care provider or child’s school</li> <li>• Award temporary custody of minor child</li> <li>• Establish temporary visitation</li> <li>• Award emergency family maintenance</li> <li>• Award temporary use and possession of a jointly titled vehicle or possession of pets</li> <li>• Counseling</li> <li>• Surrender firearms</li> <li>• Any relief necessary to protect the person eligible for relief from abuse</li> </ul> | <p><b>What kinds of relief are available?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refrain from abusing or threatening victim</li> <li>• Refrain from contacting, attempting to contact, or harassing victim</li> <li>• Refrain from entering the residence of the victim</li> <li>• Remain away from victim’s employment, school, or temporary residence</li> <li>• Counseling</li> </ul> |

# Peace and Protective Orders in Child Sexual Assault Cases

Adults seeking to protect a victim of child sexual abuse may consider whether to file for a Protective Order.

However, this may not always be the best option because it can expose the child-victim to the perpetrator and may not provide much additional protection if a perpetrator has already been arrested.

On the other hand, if issues such as temporary custody need to be resolved or there is a risk of violence from the perpetrator, seeking an order may be a good option.



Keep in mind that if a case involves “sexual abuse” of a child as defined by the law (if the child molester is related to, lives with, or has responsibility for the child-victim), then Child Protective Services will investigate. The court will then receive a Child Protective Services Report prior to the hearing on the final Protective Order. (See previous sections on “sexual abuse” of a minor, and child protective services.)

These are complex issues and should be discussed with an attorney. (See *Recommended Resources Section on page 35.*)

**Keep in mind that if a case involves “sexual abuse” of a child as defined by the law (if the child molester is related to, lives with, or has responsibility for the child-victim), then Child Protective Services will investigate.**

## Family Law: Custody and Visitation

Allegations of child sexual abuse generally come up in family law cases when one parent believes the other parent or someone in the other household (such as a mother’s boyfriend) is sexually abusing their child.

Child Protective Services may be involved when the allegations first come to light, or they may stay out of the case because the child is not living with the alleged abuser and the court is already involved.

Criminal cases are often completed prior to custody determinations. There are many situations, however, where no criminal charges have been brought, but child sexual abuse is an issue for the custody case.

## Required Court Determinations

If a court finds that there are “reasonable grounds to believe that a child has been abused,” the court is required to determine whether abuse is “likely” to occur in the future. “Unless the court specifically finds that there is no likelihood of further child abuse,” the court is required to deny custody and all unsupervised visitation. Supervised visitation may be ordered if it can assure “the safety and the physiological,

psychological, and emotional well-being of the child.” (See Family Law Article section 9-101.)

Many courts, however, view allegations of child sexual abuse with suspicion. Moreover, many allegations are difficult to prove because of the age of the child or a child’s reaction to the court process and dissolution of their family.



## Professionals in the Court May Ask for Help in Custody and Visitation Cases

Courts may seek help from other professionals when deciding custody cases, and frequently do in cases involving allegations of child sexual abuse.

**Custody Evaluators** are mental health professionals (often social workers) who interview the parents, child, and others involved with the family and report their findings to the court. Their evaluations can be in-depth or superficial. Many evaluators work on staff for the courts. Private parties and their attorneys may also hire someone to conduct a custody evaluation.

**Child’s Attorneys** may be appointed by the court to represent the child, the child’s best interest, or both. Many legal professionals believe a child’s attorney should be routinely appointed in cases involving disputed allegations of child sexual abuse. Parties may file a motion asking that an attorney for the child be appointed, even if they do not have an attorney themselves. However, the court is not required to appoint an attorney for the child.

### Other Evaluations:

Other types of evaluations might also be ordered by the court or requested by attorneys. These may include a psycho-social evaluation, home studies, or other tests conducted by mental health professionals.



## False Allegations

It is estimated that only 4% to 8% of child sexual abuse reports are fabricated.<sup>1</sup> The majority of fabricated reports are made by adults involved in custody disputes, or by adolescents.



False allegations of child sexual abuse generally fall into two categories — good faith but mistaken beliefs and maliciously false. Good faith but mistaken beliefs occur when one parent truly believes that sexual abuse happened, but the behavior was innocent or the identity of the perpetrator incorrect. In these cases, a parent who truly believed

abuse occurred but did nothing could be criticized as being neglectful of the child.

Maliciously false allegations are abusive to a child in and of themselves, but are also fairly infrequent.

## Lawyers for Parents

Many Family Law cases in Maryland involve litigants who are “pro se” — meaning they have no lawyer. However, litigants in cases involving child sexual abuse allegations need competent lawyers with experience handling these types of cases. These cases are extremely difficult to prove and a parent attempting to protect her or his child will be at a strong disadvantage without an attorney. *(A list of resources is included at the end of this booklet.)*



“...litigants in cases involving child sexual abuse allegations need competent lawyers with experience handling these types of cases.”

1. Everson, M., and Boat, B. (1989). *False allegations of sexual abuse by children and adolescents*. Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 28, 2:230-35.

## Custody: Physical and Legal

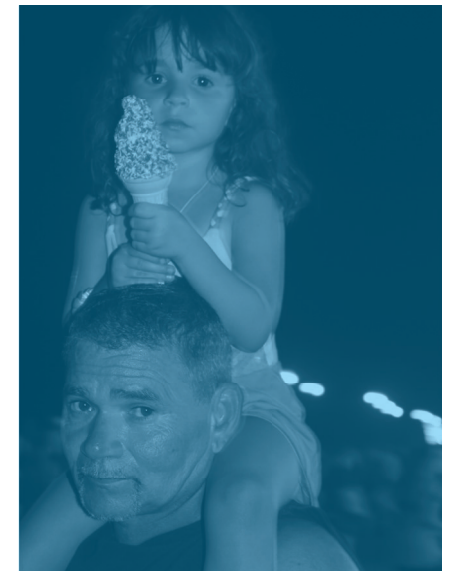
There are two parts to custody. “Physical custody” determines where a child lives. “Legal custody” determines which parents make decisions about the major issues in a child’s life such as education, health care, religion, and discipline.

“Joint legal custody” requires that the child’s parents get along well enough to discuss these major issues and make decisions together. In cases where one parent has accused the other of sexually abusing a child (or failing to protect a child from sexual abuse), it would be extremely rare for a joint legal custody arrangement to be effective. Parents in these cases should use great caution before agreeing to joint custody.

## Visitation

Parents generally have a right to have a relationship with their children. However, if both parents abuse or neglect a child, the courts may terminate parental rights. Oddly, if only one parent is abusive, that parent’s parental rights cannot be terminated — it has to be terminated for both or neither. However, courts may restrict an abusive parent’s visitation with their child by requiring that the visit be supervised or even suspended.

Keep in mind that if a court does not or is unable to find that abuse occurred, visitation will almost certainly be ordered. In these cases, it is often helpful to keep a child in counseling so they have a professional outside the family keeping an eye on things. This professional would then report any future abuse and help the child identify “good touch” and “bad touch.”





## Custody Cases: Process

Custody cases, including divorce cases involving custody, start with one parent filing a “Complaint.” This is served on the other parent, who then has 30 to 90 days to “Answer,” depending on where they were served. If you do not have an attorney, there are “pro se” forms for filing a custody case available in the courthouse and at [www.courts.state.md.us/family/family-forms](http://www.courts.state.md.us/family/family-forms).

### Emergency Custody

In cases involving child sexual abuse, the parent who is trying to protect the child often files a request for emergency custody. It is difficult to do this without a lawyer, but these requests often get a case into Court very quickly and help to stabilize a child’s home during an investigation. The parent must show an imminent risk of harm to the child.



### Temporary or “Pendente Lite” Custody

In most counties and cities in Maryland, it takes many months before a custody case goes to trial. Courts may set temporary custody and visitation orders pending a trial. This may be before or after custody evaluations or other investigations into child sexual abuse are conducted.

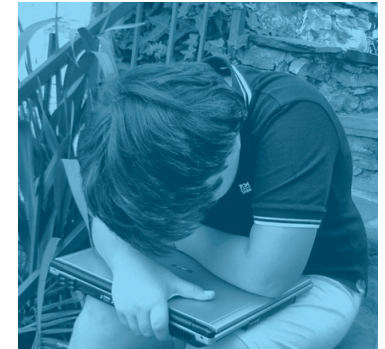
### “Permanent” Custody and Modifying Custody

“Permanent” custody refers to a custody order created at the end of a trial on a case’s merits. However, custody is never really permanent. A parent can ask the court to modify at any time until the child turns 18 if there is a “material change in circumstances.” Sometimes children disclose sexual abuse only after her or his parents are divorced or custody has been decided. The custody case can be reopened because the disclosure of sexual abuse is a material change in circumstances.

## Family Law: Divorce

As of October 1, 2023, Maryland eliminated “at-fault” grounds for divorce. However, sexual assault of a minor child of the complaining party qualifies as ‘irreconcilable differences’ for which a court may terminate a marriage.

Consult with a competent attorney with experience in domestic violence or sexual abuse cases.



Sexual assault of a minor child of the complaining party may qualify as “irreconcilable differences.”



## Immigration

Federal law provides help for some immigrant survivors of child sexual abuse and their immediate family members when the sexual abuse occurred in the United States. Victims who are immigrants (or their caretakers) should consult with an attorney about the effect reporting and prosecution may have on their immigration options.



## Tort Lawsuits

Victims of child sexual abuse may wish to consider suing the perpetrator or other responsible people, businesses, or entities to receive financial compensation for the harm caused by the abuse.

There are strict deadlines, known as a statute of limitations, for filing most lawsuits. Once a deadline has passed, it is no longer possible to file a lawsuit. The Maryland Child Victims Act of 2023 removed all time limits for child survivors to bring lawsuits based on sexual abuse. However, currently, there are legal challenges about whether this law can apply to cases that were already past the statute of limitations in 2023.

Victims, or their caretakers, should consult a competent tort attorney (sometimes referred to as a “personal injury” attorney) as soon as possible to learn more about their options and if there are any deadlines to file their lawsuit.



Victims of child sexual abuse may wish to consider suing the perpetrator or other responsible people, businesses, or entities.

## Concluding Thoughts

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Discovering your child may have been sexually abused is one of the most terrifying experiences a parent can have. These cases are rarely clear or easy to prove. It is difficult to even know exactly what happened.

Children, by their very nature, may be unable to clearly express to anyone what happened to them, much less able to explain the events to a judge or jury.

It is vital that you continue to seek information and knowledge about the legal system, the emotional needs of your child, and safety issues for your family. Please read this booklet and discuss its contents with the professionals with whom you are involved. However, please also find support for yourself, whether it be from a trusted family member, friend, religious leader, or counseling professional. Your child needs your support; however, you too need to be supported so you can support your child.



Please continue to work with the legal system and challenge it to work in your child's best interests. And even if the legal system does not work as you wish it to, please continue to keep your focus on the needs of your child.

It is vital that you continue to seek information and knowledge about the legal system, the emotional needs of your child, and safety issues for your family.

## Recommended Resources

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### **A Mother's Nightmare - Incest: A Practical Guide for Parents and Professionals**

*John E.B. Myers, Sage Publications, 1997*

This book provides excellent and practical advice for parents of incest victims.

### **ChildHelp USA National Child Abuse Hotline**

24/7 support: 1-800-4-A-CHILD

### **Darkness to Light National Child Sexual Abuse Helpline**

24/7 support: 1-866-FOR-LIGHT or text LIGHT to 741741

### **The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children Hotline**

24/7 support: 1-800-843-5678



### **Sexual Assault Legal Institute**

Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault  
301-565-2277 or 877-496-SALI (toll-free)

### **Family Law Hotline**

A project of the Women's Law Center of Maryland  
& the Maryland Legal Aid Bureau  
1-800-845-8550

# Sexual Assault Legal Institute

## Rape Recovery and Sexual Assault Programs

Regardless of when and where the violence occurs, help is available to every victim through the Hotlines at the 17 Rape Crisis programs that are members of the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

### Allegany

Family Crisis  
Resource Center  
301-759-9244

### Anne Arundel

YWCA of Annapolis &  
Anne Arundel  
410-222-6800

### Baltimore City

TurnAround, Inc.  
443-279-0379

### Baltimore County

TurnAround, Inc.  
443-279-0379

### Calvert

Calvert Center for Change  
410-535-1121

### Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's, Talbot

For All Seasons, Inc.  
410-820-5600,  
toll free: 1-800-310-7273  
Para Español: 410-829-6143

### Carroll

CARE Healing Center  
410-857-7322

### Cecil

The Bridge  
410-996-0333

### Charles

Center for  
Abused Persons  
301-645-3336

### Frederick

Heartly House, Inc.  
301-662-8800

### Garrett

Dove Center  
301-334-9000  
toll free 1-800-656-4673

### Harford

Sexual Assault/  
Spouse Abuse Resource Center  
(SARC)  
410-836-8430

### Howard

HopeWorks  
410-997-2272

### Montgomery

Trauma Services  
240-777-4357

### Prince George's

DV/SA Center at UM Capital  
Region Medical Center  
240-677-2337

### St. Mary's

Southern Maryland Center for  
Family Advocacy  
301-373-4141  
240-925-0084

### Somerset, Wicomico, Worcester

Life Crisis Center, Inc.  
410-749-HELP (4357)

### Washington

CASA, Inc.  
301-739-8975



P.O. Box 8782, Silver Spring, MD 20907 | 301-565-2277 | 877-496-SALI | fax 301-565-3619

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