



NATIONAL  
CHILDREN'S  
ALLIANCE®

# When Images Hurt

**How to understand, respond, and find hope for your child**

---

Learning that your child was harmed by abusive images can be overwhelming. Victims of those who produce images of child exploitation can experience a range of thoughts, feelings and behaviors, and the fallout may last a long time. Information and assistance is vital for caregivers like you who contribute to the child's healing. This guide offers information and resources to help you restore your child's sense of safety and find hope for the future.



## What happens now?

Someone you care for has been a victim of child pornography. Take your time to understand what has happened and how your child has been affected. Breathe. Try to be a good listener. Your child may have many questions. Don't worry about having all of the answers. Let them know it is okay to not have all the answers right away, but that you will get through this together, with support and in time. You will have the opportunity to aid an investigation, and you will receive referrals for counseling support and resources to assist you on your road to recovery. Remember: by coming to the Children's Advocacy Center (CAC), you have already taken the first step in responding to the needs of your child.

## How do I talk with family members, siblings, and friends about what happened?

Child sexual abuse can be upsetting to family members, siblings and other loved ones. However, when this abuse is documented in photos or videos, which are then at risk of being shared, the distress felt by your child and everyone who cares about them can feel even stronger. When speaking with others, it is important to be open and honest. Let them know that an investigation is being conducted, and that the most important concern is for the well-being of your child. Explain to others that your child is not to blame and will need their support through the healing process. Talk to any other children in the household about what happened, and reassure them that they can receive support as well. An experienced counselor can guide you in having this conversation in an age-appropriate way. Finally, remember you are under no obligation to talk to anyone other than those that need to know.

## What can I do to help my child through this process?

### Be understanding.

This experience is like no other. It may bring out reactions and behaviors that leave both of you feeling angry, uncertain, or out of control.

### Be patient.

For a time, your child may feel unsafe and insecure in the world. As you gain resources and information, you can help in restoring a sense of safety. With time, your child can return to activities they enjoyed before.

### Be loving.

Spend time with your child, doing things that they enjoy, without any pressure. Reassure them of your love and respect.

### Keep it simple.

For a time, you and your child may find it difficult to concentrate. Even simple things may be hard to remember. Do not make any major life changes or introduce unnecessary challenges. Allow space and time for healing.

### Keep it real.

Whatever you and your child are feeling is normal and understandable. Help your child understand what to expect as their thoughts, feelings and behaviors change over time.

## How will what happened impact my child?

Every child is different, and yours has survived a potentially traumatic experience. You may notice changes in your child because of the trauma they have experienced including some or all of the below problems, or even none of them. Keep in mind, these changes may not happen immediately. This chart can help you identify some signs of trauma to be aware of.

### Possible Areas of Concern in Victims of Child Pornography



#### Mental

Victims may experience changes in the way they think about themselves, others and the world in general. Concentration and decision-making may become difficult.



#### Behavioral

Victims may become withdrawn or isolated from friends and family. Avoidance of particular people, places or situations, fearing others may know what happened. Some victims may become more confrontational or pick fights. Eating patterns may change. Some may engage in self-harm behaviors such as cutting, excessive drinking, or drug use.



#### Physical

Some victims may have nervous energy, feel jittery, or experience muscle tension. Others may report an upset stomach, headaches, rapid heart rate, dizziness, or lack of energy/fatigue. Some people may have trouble sleeping.



#### Relationships

Some victims may withdraw from peers and family, fearing that others know what happened or will judge them. As images may linger on the internet, some may fear that others will have viewed the images.



#### Emotional

Feelings may range from strong emotional reaction to numbness. Common emotions include: fear or a general feeling of being unsafe, sadness, grief, depression, guilt, anger/irritability, inability to feel joy, loss of trust, loss of self-esteem, feeling helpless, or feeling empty.



#### Spiritual

Some victims may experience a loss of faith, stop engaging in religious or spiritual activities, experience changes in belief, feelings of being abandoned or punished by a higher power, and loss of meaning and purpose in life. Others may spend more time engaged in spiritual or religious activities.



#### Sexuality

There may be questions regarding sexuality, act out sexually, or struggle with intimate relationships. It may be difficult to establish healthy boundaries and expectations of themselves and their partners.



#### Legal

Traditional legal terms such as “victim” and “perpetrator” can be confusing. Many victims feel responsible for what happened, or worry about getting someone they care about in trouble. It is not unusual to feel conflicting emotions about participation in the legal process.

These consequences are serious, just as the crime was serious. However, evidence-based trauma treatments delivered by the CAC or referred to an outside therapist can reduce trauma symptoms and help children go on to lead a happy, fulfilled life. CACs are here to help.

## **I know my child needs help, but how do I know if I should seek counseling for myself?**

The stress you're experiencing can cause fear, anxiety, depression, or the inability to form close, satisfying relationships. Experiencing frightening memories, nightmares, or flashbacks are all symptoms of traumatic stress, and counseling can help. You are the single most important factor in your child's recovery, and accepting help for yourself may be one of the best things you can do for your child. Counseling can be beneficial for anyone, but is especially helpful if you are going through a tough situation.

### **How will counseling help?**

Counseling can help you and your child understand reactions, build better communication with each other, develop positive coping skills, and work through the impact of this experience. Treatment can address your child's fear, hurt, worry, guilt, anger, powerlessness or sense of being unsafe. Through counseling, you and your child can find a renewed sense of hope and direction.

Even if you are not experiencing symptoms, it is important to learn effective techniques for coping with stress. Life after a trauma can be difficult, and you may encounter unexpected challenges with supporting your child. To help your child, you must allow yourself time to nurture yourself and build awareness of your own feelings.

### **What counseling options are available?**

Counselors that work with CACs specialize in working with survivors of trauma. Treatment that is "trauma-focused" is very effective in relieving many of the symptoms noted above, as well as helping your child address this experience, and begin to heal. Your CAC will connect you with a counselor who can help you and your child heal.

## Where can I go for support and resources to help my family?

Families impacted by child pornography can find assistance from a variety of agencies and organizations. Professionals will work as a team to address the safety, health and well-being of your child. Below are examples of these multidisciplinary team (MDT) partners and how they may be involved in your case.

Resources	Examples of Agencies and Organizations	What's their role?	What questions could they answer?
<b>Law Enforcement</b>	<p><b>State &amp; Local Agencies</b> like the police or sheriff's office</p> <p><b>Federal Agencies</b> like the FBI or Homeland Security investigators</p>	<p>Investigate reports of possession, production, or distribution of child pornography</p> <p>Collect and preserve evidence (physical and testimonial)</p>	<p>Who will see the images of my child?</p> <p>Where and how will images be stored?</p> <p>What will happen to criminals who share the images?</p>
<b>Child Protective Services</b>	<p><b>State or county agencies</b> charged with protecting children: Department for Children and Families (known in some states as CPS, DFCS, DCYF, etc.), Health and Human Services</p>	<p>Protect children at risk and prevent further harm</p> <p>Assess immediate safety and future risk</p> <p>Investigate reports of child pornography</p> <p>Enhance the protective capacities of parents and caregivers</p> <p>Intervene by placing children outside of the home when safety cannot be established through any other means</p> <p>Implement individualized treatment plans for children and families</p> <p>Ongoing case management</p>	<p>What resources are available to help me keep my child safe?</p> <p>Will my child be able to remain in my care?</p>



Resources	Examples of Agencies and Organizations	What's their role?	What questions could they answer?
<b>Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) and/or Multidisciplinary Teams (MDTs)</b>	Your CAC (also known as a CJC or by other names), based in nonprofits, hospitals, enforcement or prosecutors' offices or other government agencies, or as part of a larger victim service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conduct video-recorded forensic interviews of children as a part of a child maltreatment investigation</li> <li>Provide victim advocacy and family support</li> <li>Connect families to community resources like therapy and more</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How will interviews be conducted and who will they be shared with?</li> <li>What resources are available in my community for support?</li> <li>I need more help. Where can I turn?</li> </ul>
<b>Victim Advocacy</b>	Your CAC, family advocate, victim witness specialists within a prosecutor's office, family violence organizations, or sexual abuse organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide resources to survivors and caregivers</li> <li>Prepare child witnesses and family members for court hearings</li> <li>Crisis counseling</li> <li>Crime Victim Compensation and financial assistance</li> <li>Restraining orders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are my rights as a crime victim or caregiver for a child victim?</li> <li>What if I can't afford to get my child help?</li> <li>How can I be notified about the offender's status or case events?</li> <li>How can my child have a voice in the court process?</li> </ul>
<b>Medical Providers</b>	Hospital Emergency Rooms, Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners, Child Abuse Pediatricians, Primary Care Providers, CAC Medical Providers	Medical evaluations to assess the health of your child and provide necessary treatment and reassurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Will you be able to tell what happened to my child by looking at them?</li> <li>Will my child experience health problems?</li> </ul>

Resources	Examples of Agencies and Organizations	What's their role?	What questions could they answer?
<b>Therapeutic/ Behavioral Health/Mental Health Counseling</b>	Counselors, Therapists, Psychologists, Psychiatrists	Assess children exhibiting symptoms of trauma Provide necessary treatment to children and caregivers	How can I support my child's healing? How does trauma-focused therapy work? Will my child get better?
<b>Emotional Peer Support</b>	CACs, Team HOPE volunteers through NCMEC	Connect victims and their families with other survivors of child sexual abuse Peer support from those who were directly impacted in similar situations	What did you do to help your child feel safe? How did you answer questions from friends and in the community? How did you move forward?
<b>Prosecution</b>	U.S. Attorney's Offices, State Prosecutor's Offices, State Attorneys General Offices, District Attorneys, Juvenile Justice agencies	Determine whether and how formal criminal court actions will be initiated Assist law enforcement with investigations Represent the state in child welfare proceedings	What will happen to the offender? Will my child have to testify? How will I know what is happening with our case?
<b>Education Services</b>	School administrators, teachers, state and local education boards and districts	Report concerns of child maltreatment to authorities Provide support to students impacted by child pornography Share pertinent information with investigative agencies	What can my child do if they are upset or distracted at school? What support services are available for my child within the school? What does the school do if additional information is reported there?



## What about the images and/or videos of my child on the internet?

While it's true that the internet cannot be 'scrubbed clean' of content, technology continues to be developed that enhances investigators' ability to find child pornography images and videos, and in many cases, remove them from the internet. The most important thing for you to remember is that you are not responsible for the pictures or anything that happens as a result of the pictures.

## What if I need help paying for services for my child?

Each state has a Victims' Compensation program to assist victims and their families with financial costs associated with a crime. Child Advocacy Centers and other victim-serving agencies are a useful resource to assist families in applying for Victims' Compensation. In some states, the application may be available online. Although it varies by state, some of the expenses that qualify for compensation may include:



**Medical, dental and pharmacy expenses**



**Transportation  
(court/medical/counseling)**



**Counseling costs**



**Loss of essential  
personal property**



**Lost wages or  
lost support**

Family members may be eligible to apply for compensation depending on state regulations and the nature of the crime. Please contact your local Child Advocacy Center for information on your state's specific Victims' Compensation eligibility standards. More information is available at [www.ovc.gov](http://www.ovc.gov).

## How can I help keep my child safe in the future?



### Be willing to talk about anything.

As a trusted adult, establish open and honest communication with your child. Create a relationship with your child so that they feel safe sharing real-life situations with you. Let them know that they can always come to you for help, without fear of judgment. Talk with your child directly about the risks and dangers in both the real world and online. Brainstorm with your child about how to avoid or handle potential incidents.



### Be a good digital role model.

Curb your own bad digital habits. Know when to unplug. Show your kids how to create healthy boundaries online.



### Use parental controls.

Activate the safety settings in your operating system, search engine, and games. Use the parental controls on your children's phones, tablets, and game consoles. Monitor the use of personal electronic devices and limit screen time.

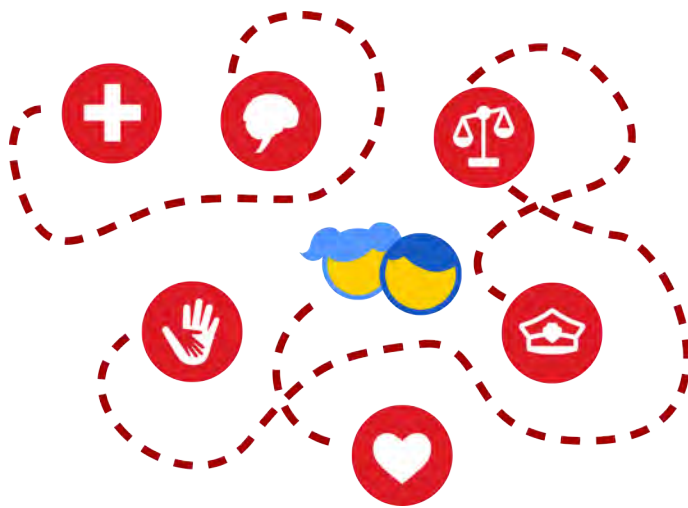
“ I learned to contain my own rage and reactions for a later time so that I could be present and respond to my child's emotional needs. ”

## Where can I turn for more assistance and info?

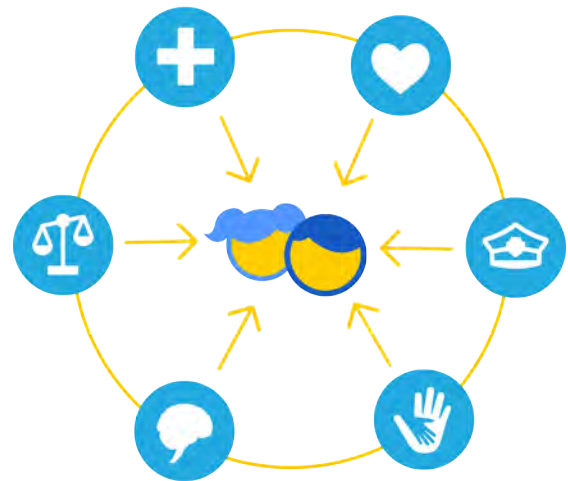
You can locate the closest CAC at [www.nationalchildrensalliance.org](http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org). If the nearest CAC is inaccessible, you can get help from your social services, local hospital, or law enforcement agency.

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's Family Advocacy Division also has a network of mental health professionals across the country specially trained to work with survivors of child sexual abuse. Please contact [familysupport@ncmec.org](mailto:familysupport@ncmec.org) for a referral in your area.

### Without CACs



### With CACs



*Without CACs or MDTs, it's up to children and families to navigate a confusing system to find the resources they need. With CACs or MDTs, services are aligned and delivered to children.*

## The Facts about Child Pornography

Federal law defines child pornography as any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a minor (under 18 years of age). The images may be pictures, videos, or other computer-generated images. Child pornography images are not protected under First Amendment rights, and are illegal under federal law. Unfortunately, your child is not alone. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children has record of over 13,000 identified victims of child pornography worldwide.

It is difficult to provide accurate statistics on the prevalence of child pornography victimization because studies show it is vastly under-reported. The National Center for Victims of Crime at [www.victimsofcrime.org](http://www.victimsofcrime.org) has additional information regarding the prevalence of child abuse.

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children at [www.missingkids.org](http://www.missingkids.org) can also serve as a resource. Search "Child Sexual Exploitation" for relevant information.

This project was supported by Grant # 2016-NZ-NX-K056 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

**National Children's Alliance**  
**516 C Street, NE**  
**Washington, DC 20002 US**

**[nationalchildrensalliance.org](http://nationalchildrensalliance.org)**