

CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Although we are still learning about the complex interactions between abuse and disabilities, two facts are well documented:

- children with disabilities are more likely to be abused than other children (Govindshenoy & Spencer, 2006; Jaudes & Mackey-Bilaver, 2008; Sobsey, 1995; Sobsey & Varnhagen, 1988; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000); and
- some childhood disabilities result from child abuse (e.g., traumatic brain injury as a result of shaking an infant (Health Canada, 2001); violence during pregnancy (Campbell, Garcia-Moreno & Sharps, 2004, p. 771; Cook & Bewley, 2008; Sarkar, 2008)).

A number of factors contribute to the increased risks experienced by children with special needs.

1. Many people think that children with special needs do not experience violence or abuse. Some people think that individuals with disabilities are not sexual, or sexually attractive, or that no one would ever want to hurt them. In fact, it is the child's vulnerability, not "sexual attractiveness" that draws the abuser who is looking for control.
2. Children with special needs may have multiple caregivers, and are much more likely to live outside their natural families than other children. Children with disabilities who are placed in these settings are at an increased risk for child abuse as a result of their exposure to a greater number of caregivers.
3. Children with disabilities have unequal power in relationships. Children whose mobility is impaired are unable to escape. Children with disabilities may not have had the learning opportunities and social interactions with peers available to other children. This may leave them at a disadvantage because of lack of knowledge of appropriate or inappropriate behaviour. Children may be unable to express themselves, to disclose or ask for help if communication is impaired.
4. Children with disabilities are more dependent on their caregivers, which may include extensive care necessary for washing, toileting and dressing, and may not recognize a situation as inappropriate or abusive. Additionally, these children may be unable to tell due to a communication difficulty, or may be afraid to tell for fear of: not being believed; being separated from their families; or losing needed services.
5. Forms of restraint are sometimes used with children who have special needs. Restraining a child who is deemed to be a risk to him/herself and/or others may be considered necessary to protect the child or others in close contact with him/her. The risk of hurting a child increases when there is: a lack of consistent reasons for restraining a child; an unclear definition of "harm to oneself or others"; and caregivers who lack training to safely restrain children. Restraint may also serve to escalate a situation and therefore increase the risk of injury.

Cultural attitudes and beliefs about children with special needs have been linked to child abuse and violence, such as the belief that their lives have less value, they are less than fully human, they are incapable of suffering or they suffer excessively.