

Saskatoon Sexual Assault & Information Centre (SSAIC)



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Sexual Assault vs. Sexual Abuse – What’s the Difference?

The terms ‘sexual assault’ and ‘sexual abuse’ are often used interchangeably. There are, however, distinctions between the two terms. For the sake of clarity and consistency, it is helpful to define each term.

Sexual Assault: Any unwanted sexual act or behavior which is threatening, violent, forced, or coercive and to which a person has not given consent to or was not able to give consent. Sexual assault is most often used in reference to a single experience.

Sexual assault can include:

- Penetration of the victim’s body (with a penis, fingers, or other objects); also known as rape
- Attempted rape
- Forcing a victim to perform sexual acts, such as oral sex or penetrating the perpetrator’s body
- Fondling or unwanted sexual touching
- Any type of sexual contact with someone who cannot consent, such as someone who is underage, has physical or mental disability, or is unconscious/passed out
- Sexual coercion (coercion is unwanted sexual activity that happens after someone is pressured, tricked, or forced in a nonphysical way)
- Sexual contact with a child
- Incest (sexual contact between family members)
- Fondling or unwanted touching above or under clothes

Sexual Abuse: Often used in reference to a sexual act, as described above, committed against a child or adolescent or a vulnerable adult by someone in a position of power or authority/perceived authority. We use the term most frequently when speaking about sexual violence committed against children.

Sexual abuse can occur between:

- A child and an adult
- A child and an older child

- A patient and a doctor
- A student and a teacher
- A parishioner and a priest
- An intimate relationship in which the abused individual is controlled through fear and manipulation

Sexual Abuse most often (not always) involves sexually abusive acts over a longer period of time and incorporates grooming behaviors. Grooming is a gradual, calculated process by which a sex offender draws a victim into a sexual relationship and maintains that relationship in secrecy. The grooming process involves many steps including: targeting the victim, gaining their trust, filling a need the victim has, making their relationship unique, isolating the victim from others, and eventually sexualizing the relationship.

Sexual abuse does not need to include physical contact between a perpetrator and a victim. Some forms of child sexual abuse include:

- Exhibitionism, or exposing oneself to a minor
- Masturbation in the presence of a minor or forcing the minor to masturbate
- Engaging the child in looking at, watching or being a part of sexualized pictures
- Obscene phone calls, text messages, or digital interaction
- Engaging the child in the taking of sexual images of the child
- Any other sexual conduct that is harmful to a child's mental, emotional, or physical welfare

Sexual Violence (or sexualized violence) is an all-encompassing term that includes sexual assault, sexual abuse and sexual harassment. The word violence does not refer to physical violence but includes emotional and psychological harm.