Abuse or exploration? [1]

Dear Alice,

I am an 18-year-old girl and it is my first year in college. I am also involved in my first physically intimate relationship. At the beginning of the relationship, I was having a lot of problems with feeling sexually aroused and being physical with my boyfriend. It made me cry almost every time. Then, I remembered some experiences involving adult sexual behavior (both physical and conversations over the phone) with my best friend in first and second grade. I had not thought of these experiences in years, and the memories, even now, make me feel sad, scared, and sometimes guilty.

I remember being afraid to see her and being very upset as a child about what we did. I don’t remember much, only very small snippets of what happened here and there. I went into therapy at school, and I can be intimate now without crying, but these memories still bother me and I just want to know what to call it. Is this child-on-child sexual abuse, or just little kids exploring?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It’s incredibly brave of you to process your past experiences and to try to understand how they may be affecting your current experience of sexual intimacy. It’s crucial to note that while childhood sexual exploration can be common and healthy, it doesn’t mean that all children want to engage in these experiences by themselves or with others. Whether or not your experiences fall within the definition of child abuse, it’s apparent that they’ve caused you emotional distress. As your question pertains to the possibility of child-on-child sexual abuse, it’s worth mentioning that there are varying definitions and consequences of this behavior, as child sexual abuse is most discussed in the context of being perpetrated by adults. Though you might find comfort in applying a definitive label to these experiences, only you can determine the label that best fits your experience. You might find it helpful to continue the therapeutic relationship with your mental health professional or you may wish to find one who specializes in abuse or trauma [2]. In any case, how you choose to cope and resolve these feelings is up to you.

To start teasing apart child abuse from sexual exploration, it may be helpful to first understand the stages of sexual maturation. While children don’t experience sexual desire in the same way that many adults do, they may start to exhibit sexual behaviors early in their life. It’s
typical for babies and toddlers to touch their genitals, run naked, and experience physiological arousal (for example, erections and vaginal lubrication). Around ages 3 to 5, many children are in a “playing doctor” phase, where they’re driven by curiosity to ask questions about and explore each other’s bodies. By ages 6 to 10, children become more influenced by gender roles, pervasive beliefs, and societal expectations surrounding expressing sexuality. They may engage in conversations with one another about their sexuality and behavior that may be unintentionally hurtful. On average, puberty occurs between the ages 10 to 14, leading to many physical, social, and emotional changes. Adolescents are often learning to deal with their new body and feelings, leading to further exploration (e.g., masturbation), wanting more privacy, and feeling worried about being “normal.” Additionally, they experience more sexual urges, leading them to seek out romantic and sexual relationships. Thus, despite the confusion and discomfort that may arise when discussing child sexuality, the reality is that many children are naturally curious about their own and others’ bodies.

Child sexual abuse is when a child is involved in sexual activity to which they don't have the ability to provide informed consent or to fully understand. These can include masturbating in the presence of a minor or making a minor masturbate as well as sex, fondling, or exhibitionism [3] with a minor. The majority of perpetrators are adults who the minors know and are often family members, teachers, or caretakers. However, there are also child perpetrators who may intentionally or unintentionally inflict abuse on other children. In fact, as many as four in ten sexual assaults are perpetrated by juvenile sex offenders. But why might they do this? Research indicates that sometimes, sexually abusive children may be more “mature” and going through a different stage of sexual maturation than the children they abuse. Other times, abusive children may harm others because they’re also survivors of abuse and are re-enacting learned behaviors, which are negative and hurtful to others. Because of the many factors that influence children and their sexualities, it’s difficult to neatly define the reasons for child-on-child sexual abuse.

It seems like in your situation, this may not have been something you wanted to do with your friend. Your question about whether or not it was abuse really depends on your definition, the specific acts, and the context surrounding the experiences. Some might argue that regardless of age, if your friend knew you weren’t interested but continued to engage with you in this way, then it was indeed abuse. Others would argue that, even if she didn’t know, the fact that you didn’t want to do these things with her is enough to call it abuse. Whether or not you call it abuse, it clearly has affected you and hopefully continuing to seek out help will allow you to work through it.

Your intimacy woes may be related to what happened with your friend, but there might be other reasons and factors as well. Though coping with sexual abuse or misconduct can seem isolating and scary, you may find that understanding and compassionate communication with your boyfriend can provide you with reassurance and comfort to move forward. As it can be difficult for those who don’t have past experiences with abuse or trauma to understand these reactions, here are some tips on how to approach these conversations:

- Reflect on what you might want to say during the conversation. Think about the physical intimacy, particularly what you like or don’t like, what makes you feel comfortable and safe, and what you want to explore in the future.
- Consider boundaries that you’ve established or would like to establish in the future. It may be helpful to think or talk about a time where your partner respected your boundaries and positively reinforce this behavior. Likewise, you could establish a “safe word” that’s a word not typically said during sexual activity that would signal a desire to
immediately stop.

- Explicitly talk about consent. You and your boyfriend can discuss how you want to give and receive consent to sexual or intimate contact, in a way that makes you both feel safe, respected, and comfortable.
- Discuss other ways to be intimate. If you feel that it’s too soon or uncomfortable to be physically intimate with your partner, consider talking about what other forms of intimacy (e.g., emotional intimacy) and affection you would be comfortable with and how you can negotiate that in your relationship.

You may also find it beneficial to speak with your mental health professional about how you’d like to communicate with your boyfriend about this, as they can offer further advice. Your processing through these feelings of sadness, fear, and guilt are both impressive and courageous because of how difficult it can be. Hopefully, with time and support you’ll be able to experience more balanced emotions in your relationships, feeling more joy than negative emotions. Knowing that your process may take some time, try to be patient with yourself, respect your personal boundaries, and let what feels right in the moment be your guide. At times, this may be to not be physically intimate at all, and that’s perfectly okay. In what ways you feel comfortable being intimate with your partner and how you wish to proceed with your healing process is for you to determine but know there are resources available to provide support so you don’t have to do it alone.

Alice!

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