

Signs and Symptoms of Sexually Abused Children

When children are in abusive situations they may ask for help in a variety of ways—sometimes verbally, but more often behaviorally. Here are some of the behavioral, physical, and/or sexual signs of assault. While some of the following signs can be seen in healthy children, you know your child best; if you observe a behavior that is unusual or exists over a prolonged period, then ask questions and get help.

Behavioral/Emotional Signs

- ▶ depression and anxiety (withdrawn, irritable, listless)
- ▶ excessive fear or refusal to be with a particular person or go to a particular place
- ▶ sleep disturbances (nightmares, fear of dark, fear of monsters)
- ▶ regressed behavior (bed wetting, thumb sucking)
- ▶ aggressive or abusive behavior toward younger children
- ▶ sudden changes in behavior (cooperative child becomes defiant; happy child becomes sad)
- ▶ talking about a new, older friend
- ▶ over compliance or child assuming adult responsibilities
- ▶ conduct problems
- ▶ secrets and lies
- ▶ inability to love or trust others

Physical Signs

- ▶ painful urination or frequent urinary infections
- ▶ scratches, bruises, rashes, cuts, burns, or injuries to the genital area
- ▶ blood or discharge in bedding or clothes (particularly underwear)
- ▶ difficulty sitting or walking
- ▶ sexually transmitted diseases
- ▶ stomachaches, vomiting, chronic ailments

Sexual Signs

- ▶ drawings, games, or fantasies that depict sexual molestation
- ▶ inappropriate and excessive masturbation; difficulty refocusing child
- ▶ statements about body being dirty or damaged
- ▶ sexually active and/or advanced sexual knowledge given child's age
- ▶ sexual acting out with other children that is age inappropriate
- ▶ simulating sex with children, toys, or dolls
- ▶ sexual or physical assault of animals

Signs in Preteens and Adolescents

- ▶ running away from home or refusal to attend school
- ▶ secrets and lies
- ▶ self-mutilation (cutting, burning self with lighters or cigarettes)
- ▶ prostitution
- ▶ drugs and alcohol
- ▶ setting fires
- ▶ spending excessive time with a “special adult friend” or maintaining secret Internet friends
- ▶ suicidal feelings or attempts
- ▶ eating disorders (overeating or under eating)

For more “Signs and Symptoms” see *Off Limits: A Parent's Guide to Keeping Kids Safe from Sexual Abuse* (available at www.parentingsafechildren.com).