

Recognizing and Responding to Signs of Abuse

Denver Children's Advocacy Center



Children often don't tell about sexual abuse. However, children who have been sexually abused will sometimes display behavioral, physical, and emotional changes. Many of these changes are not specific to sexual abuse and can be the result of other kinds of trauma or stress. It is important to be alert to these signs and then follow up to identify the cause and get help for your child. Keep in mind that these signs will vary by age.

Behavioral Signs of Abuse

Behaviors that may indicate a problem, including the possibility of sexual abuse:

- Acting younger or going back to doing younger tasks and activities
- Sudden changes in behavior
- Fear of being alone with a certain person
- Sudden, unexplained fears of certain places or kinds of people (for example, men with moustaches)
- Fear of being touched
- Changes in quality of schoolwork or grades
- Substance abuse
- Delinquency
- Self-mutilation or careless behaviors resulting in self-harm
- Excessive play with their own private body parts
- Persistent sex play with friends, toys, or pets
- Frequent drawings that have sexual content
- Unusual, persistent, or developmentally inappropriate questioning about human sexuality

Physical Signs of Abuse

Physical signs that may indicate a problem, including the possibility of sexual abuse:

- Change in how much the child eats
- Change or increase in sleep disturbances

- Change or increase in soiling, wetting, or bedwetting
- Increase in stomach aches
- Physical pain or itching in the genital area
- Underwear stained with blood or other discharge
- Rectal bleeding
- Problems walking or sitting

If your child shows any of the physical signs that may indicate sexual abuse, take him or her to a doctor right away.

Emotional Signs of Abuse

- Severe anxiety, for example, nightmares or clinging
- Depression, for example, withdrawal, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation and attempts, or frequent crying)
- Extreme anger, for example, tantrums, aggression, or increased irritability

Talk to your doctor or the counselor at your child's school if your child shows any of these emotional signs.

Listen to Your Child

The one most reliable sign of sexual abuse is that the child says so. You may need to “open the door” for your child to tell you. Try “Something is bothering you. Can you tell me about it? Be very patient and do not push or prod. Sometimes children talk in a roundabout way and you have to listen carefully for the clues. Be careful not to plant ideas in the child’s mind. Stay as calm as possible. Children often stop talking if what they are saying makes you upset.

If your child does tell you about abuse, accept what he or she says. Don't deny or ignore it. Protect your child immediately from the suspected offender. Reassure the child that this is not his or her fault, and that help is available. Then contact the police or the Colorado Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline at 1-844-CO-4-KIDS (1-844-264-5437).

Information excerpted and adapted from The Committee for Children – www.cfchildren.org

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