

CHILD ABUSE

signs and symptoms

Child Abuse - Signs and Symptoms

Although these signs do not necessarily indicate that a child has been abused, they may help adults recognise that something is wrong. The possibility of abuse should be investigated if a child shows a number of these symptoms, or any of them to a marked degree.

Sexual Abuse

- Being overly affectionate or knowledgeable in a sexual way inappropriate to the child's age
- Medical problems such as chronic itching, pain in the genitals, venereal diseases
- Other extreme reactions, such as depression, self-mutilation, suicide attempts, running away, overdoses, anorexia
- Personality changes such as becoming insecure or clinging
- Regressing to younger behaviour patterns such as thumb sucking or bringing out discarded cuddly toys
- Sudden loss of appetite or compulsive eating
- Being isolated or withdrawn
- Inability to concentrate
- Lack of trust or fear of someone they know well, such as not wanting to be alone with a babysitter or child minder
- Starting to wet again, day or night / nightmares
- Become worried about clothing being removed
- Suddenly drawing sexually explicit pictures
- Trying to be 'ultra-good' or perfect; overreacting to criticism

Physical Abuse

- Unexplained recurrent injuries or burns
- Improbable excuses or refusal to explain injuries
- Wearing clothes to cover injuries, even in hot weather
- Refusal to undress for gym
- Bald patches
- Chronic running away
- Fear of medical help or examination
- Self-destructive tendencies
- Aggression towards others
- Fear of physical contact - shrinking back if touched
- Admitting that they are punished, but the punishment is excessive (such as a child being beaten every night to 'make him study')
- Fear of suspected abuser being contacted

Emotional Abuse

- Physical, mental and emotional development lags
- Sudden speech disorders
- Continual self-depreciation ('I'm stupid, ugly, worthless, etc')
- Overreaction to mistakes
- Extreme fear of any new situation
- Inappropriate response to pain ('I deserve this')
- Neurotic behaviour (rocking, hair twisting, self-mutilation)
- Extremes of passivity or aggression

Neglect

- Constant hunger
- Poor personal hygiene
- Constant tiredness
- Poor state of clothing
- Emaciation
- Untreated medical problems
- No social relationships
- Compulsive scavenging
- Destructive tendencies

Note:

- A child may be subjected to a combination of different kinds of abuse
- It is also possible that a child may show no outward signs and hide what is happening from everyone

Suspected Abuse

If you suspect that a child is being abused, seek advice from the police or social services. It is preferable that you identify yourself and give details. However, if you feel unsure and would like to discuss the situation, ring the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) Helpline, or the Children 1st (in Scotland), or the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. You can speak to these organisations (and the police and social services) anonymously. The numbers are given at the end of this leaflet.

Knowing how damaging abuse is to children, it is up to the adults around them to take responsibility for stopping it.

Telling

If a child tells you about abuse:

- Stay calm and be reassuring
- Find a quiet place to talk
- Believe in what you are being told
- Listen, but do not press for information
- Say that you are glad that the child told you
- If it will help the child to cope, say that the abuser has a problem
- Say that you will do your best to protect and support the child
- If necessary, seek medical help and contact the police or social services
- If your child has told another adult, such as a teacher or school nurse, contact them. Their advice may make it easier to help your child
- Determine if this incident may affect how your child reacts at school. It may be advisable to liaise with you child's teacher, school nurse or headteacher
- Acknowledge that your child may have angry, sad or even guilty feelings about what happened, but stress that the abuse was not the child's fault. Acknowledge that you will probably need help dealing with your own feelings
- Seek counselling for yourself and your child through the organisations listed or through your own contacts
- If a child discloses abuse, do not promise to keep it secret as you will have to tell in order to help the child and stop the offender

Where to Get Help

You may consider using the school as a resource, as the staff should have a network of agencies they work with, and be able to give you advice.

You can contact official agencies or self-help groups. If you are concerned about what action may be taken, ask before you proceed.

The following can be contacted through your telephone directory:

- Police
- Social Services
- Samaritans 08457 90 90 90
- National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland Freephone 0800 800 5000
- Children 1st (in Scotland) 0808 800 2222
- Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) 00 353 1 679 4944
- Childline 0800 1111
- Parentline Plus 0808 800 2222

For a free copy of the leaflet *Why My Child?* which helps parents deal with the sexual abuse of their child, send a large SAE marked 'Why My Child?' with 2 first class stamps to:

KIDSCAPE, 2 Grosvenor Gardens,
London SW1W 0DH.

Tel: 020 7730 3300

Kidscape offers training and literature to parents, children and those who work with them.

Kidscape is a registered charity founded in 1984 with the aim of teaching children, their parents and other concerned adults ways of keeping children safe.

Kidscape, registered charity number 326864, is reliant on donations.

www.kidscape.org.uk