

Signs and Symptoms of Sexual Abuse (Children and Adults)

Sexual abuse is so traumatic that distress signals will escape even from someone who cannot remember the abuse. Children depend on adults to read and understand these signals. Showing one or two items in any of the following is not usually evidence of sexual abuse. Most survivors of sexual abuse show/experience *most* of the entries in *every* list.

Emotional

- Anger, unprovoked hostility or defiance
- Extremely anxious
- Helplessness
- Fear of going home after school
- Fear of going to bed, and of the dark
- Fear of closed doors, bathrooms, showers, and rooms with only one exit
- Isolation, shame, guilt
- Fear of physical contact, especially in genital area
- Fear of being left alone with certain people
- Crying, depression, listlessness
- Confusion and betrayal

Physical

- Evidence of infection due to sexual contact (sexually transmitted infection)
- Injury to breasts, buttocks, lower abdomen, or thighs
- Injury to genital or rectal area: bleeding, bruises, hickeys, discharges, vaginal or bladder infections
- Difficulty with bladder and/or bowel control, pain on urinating
- Frequent sore throat, difficulty swallowing, frequent choking sensation
- Frequent complaints of headaches and stomach aches
- Pregnancy
- Difficulty with menstruation or delayed start of menstruation
- Sudden weight gain or extreme weight loss
- Too much or too little personal cleanliness
- Frequent cuts, cigarette burns, picked sores, slash marks
- Rocking all the time
- Refers to body as numb and hollow
- Defensive body language, covering up or hiding self, tries to be invisible
- Wearing layers of clothing day and night, crumpled clothes at school
- Clothing that either reveals too much or conceals the body

Social Behaviour

- Confused about role in the family
- Refuses or begs not to stay home with certain people
- Regression into younger behaviours previously mastered (e.g., bedwetting, baby talk, thumbsucking, toileting problems)

- Very strong need to know what is going to happen next, wanting to know everything that is happening
- Constant good behaviour; trying to be perfect in appearance and behaviour; very obedient
- Oppositional and defiant behaviour; frequent outbursts of anger
- Controlling behaviour
- Won't accept responsibility for even minor issues; often blames and criticizes others
- Withdrawn or hyperactive
- Tiredness and fatigue, frequent sleepless nights, packing and flinching when covered up at night or when uncovered at night
- Night terrors, frequent nightmares, bedwetting, sleeplessness, sleepwalking
- Appears very old for his/her age
- Inappropriate emotional reactions (e.g., laughing during a sad event)
- Has trouble relating to others of the same age; a loner
- Passive people pleaser or an aggressive fighter

School Behaviours

- Difficulties with school, including difficulty concentrating and demonstrating understanding, daydreaming (zoning out)
- Easily distracted
- Patterns of absence from school, especially with parent's consent
- Frequent reference to secrets or sexual things in schoolwork and conversation
- Pretends not to understand or to be incapable
- Difficulty in expressing opinions
- Superachiever or model student

Sexual Behaviour

- Unusual interest in genitals or genitals of others
- Frequent masturbation
- Frequent use of sexual language
- Drawings that are too sexual and too old for the child's age and stage of growth
- Drawings that show genitals through clothing; statements that make sense only in a sexual context ("He has strange underwear," or "I don't like to play the tongue game")
- Attempting sexual behaviour with other children, especially younger (often done in an aggressive and controlling way)
- Putting objects into vagina and rectum
- Being very modest, wanting privacy, fear of undressing in front of others
- Confuses everyday intimacy and affection with sexual advances
- Promiscuity (having sex with many different people)
- Prostitution (having sex for money)

Behaviours

- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Suicide attempts

- Refuses to eat or overeats
- Sets her/himself up for punishment; gets in trouble for no apparent reason
- Takes a lot of risks, including criminal behaviours (theft, arson)
- Destroys toys
- Cruel to animals or over-empathic to the suffering of others
- Self-harming behaviours (cutting, slashing)
- Runs away from home