

Early Warning Signs & Symptoms of Child Sexual Abuse

Children who are being sexually abused may exhibit physical and emotional signs or symptoms. Physical signs are not common, and when found, should be immediately investigated. Emotional or behavioral signs are more common, but may also be symptoms of other trauma in a child's life, such as maltreatment, physical abuse, neglect, or parents' divorce or separation. It is also important to keep in mind that some children exhibit no signs whatsoever.

Behavioral and emotional signs may include:

- A shift in disposition or mood, such as anxiety, depression, anger, rebellion, withdrawal, or clinginess.
- Running away from home
- Too "perfect" behavior
- Disturbances in sleep, such as nightmares or night terrors
- Changes in eating habits
- Changes in attitude towards school or academics
- Sudden refusal to change for gym or participate in physical activities
- Unusual fear of certain people or places
- Reluctance to be left alone with a certain person
- Changes in body perception, such as thinking of themselves or their bodies as being dirty or bad
- Regression to outgrown behaviors, such as bedwetting or thumb sucking
- Bizarre, sophisticated, unusual, or age-inappropriate sexual behavior or language
- Abuse of other children sexually, or attempts to undress other people

Physical signs of child sexual abuse may include:

- Contracts sexually transmitted infections (previously known as STDs)
- Vaginal or rectal cuts or tears, pain, itching, swelling, bleeding, or discharge
- Trauma to breasts, buttocks, or lower abdomen
- Blood in the child's underwear
- Unexplained or frequent health problems such as headaches or stomachaches
- Difficulty with bowel movements, urinating, or swallowing
- Self-mutilation, such as biting self, pulling out hair, or wrist-cutting
- Difficulty walking or sitting

If you or someone you know suspects child abuse, please contact your local law enforcement agency, department of social services or call 1-800-332-6347. For more information or additional resources, visit www.mcasa.org or call 800-983-7278.

Sources: Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, "Child Abuse: Symptoms", 2010.; "What to Know about Child Abuse", American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013.