Early Warning Signs & Symptoms of Child Sexual Abuse

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is any kind of sexual act or behavior with a child including contact and non-contact events (e.g., taking pornographic images of a child). Children experiencing sexual abuse may exhibit physical and emotional signs or symptoms. **Physical signs are less common**, and when found, should be immediately investigated. **Emotional or behavioral signs are more likely** but may also be symptoms of other trauma in a child’s life, such as physical abuse, neglect, or parents’ divorce or separation. It is also important to keep in mind that some children **exhibit no signs whatsoever**.

### Physical Signs

**Direct Physical Signs** of CSA are less common and include:
- Bruising, bleeding, redness and bumps, or scabs around the mouth, genitals, or anus
- Vaginal or rectal cuts, tears, or pain
- Urinary tract infections, sexually transmitted infections, and abnormal vaginal or penile discharge
- Any unexplained injury (bruise, burn, fracture, abdominal, genital, or head injury)

CSA victims are more likely to exhibit **Indirect Physical Signs** such as:
- Persistent or reoccurring pain during urination or bowel movements
- Chronic stomach pain and headaches with no medical cause
- Bedwetting or accidents unrelated to toilet training

### Emotional and Behavioral Signs

- Abnormal and unusual sexual behaviors and language that are not age-appropriate
- Unusual fear of certain people or places; reluctance to be alone with a certain person
- Nightmares, night terrors, or other disturbances in sleep
- Thinking of self or body as "dirty" or "bad"
- Changes in eating habits, which may include over-eating or stealing food
- A shift in disposition or mood resulting in anger or aggressiveness towards family, friends, or pets
- Regression to "outgrown" behavior-, such as thumb sucking, bedwetting etc.
- Poor self-esteem and avoidance of relationships
- A shift in disposition or mood resulting in anxiety or depression
- Rebellious behavior
- Change in attitude towards school, change in hobbies or interests
- Withdrawal
- Attempts to runaway
- Too "perfect" behavior or overly compliant behavior
- Self-harm, such as biting self, scratching self, pulling out hair, or cutting

Do **NOT** overlook signs and symptoms. If you or someone you know suspects child abuse, please contact your local law enforcement agency or **department of social services**. The **Darkness to Light National Child Sexual Abuse Helpline** can provide local resources and information at 1-866-FOR-LIGHT. You can also contact the **ChildHelp USA National Child Abuse Hotline** at 1-800-4-A-CHILD for 24/7 support. For more information or additional resources, visit [https://mcasa.org/prevention/preventing-child-sexual-abuse](https://mcasa.org/prevention/preventing-child-sexual-abuse) or call 301-328-7023.

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