

Sexual abuse in children and teenagers: recognising the signs

Children might not tell you that they've been sexually abused. Instead you might notice signs, including physical signs and changes in children's behaviour or emotions.

Children respond to [sexual abuse](#) differently. Many things influence how children respond, including how old children are, how frequent and severe the abuse is, what happens during the abuse, and who's doing the abuse.

Some children might show only very subtle signs, and some might not show any signs at all.

If your child shows one or more of the signs listed below, it doesn't necessarily mean they've been sexually abused. Your child's behaviour can change for many reasons, but it's important to consider sexual abuse as a possibility. It's also important to trust your instincts.

Signs of sexual abuse in children 0-11 years

Changes in emotions

If your child or the child you're caring for has been sexually abused, you might notice that your child:

- is quieter or more distant than usual
- cries for no obvious reason
- starts to wet the bed or soil their pants
- asks questions like 'Do people have to keep secrets?'
- is aggressive or seems angry for no obvious reason
- says their head or tummy hurts and there doesn't seem to be a physical cause
- starts having nightmares
- is clingy.

Changes in Behavior

You might notice that your child:

- isn't interested in playing, or is avoiding particular places or people
- is showing [problematic sexual behaviour](#)
- is having problems sleeping
- is doing less well at school.

Physical signs

You might notice that your child has:

- swelling or redness in the genital area
- pain when going to the toilet
- difficulty walking or sitting
- bruises on soft parts of their body, like buttocks or thighs
- symptoms of a [urinary tract infection](#), like burning while going to the toilet
- symptoms of a sexually transmitted infection, like discharge from the penis or vagina.

Signs of sexual abuse in teenagers

Changes in emotions

If your teenage child or the teenage child you're caring for has been sexually abused, you might notice that your child:

- is aggressive or seems angry for no apparent reason
- has headaches or stomach aches for which there doesn't seem to be a physical cause
- becomes angry or upset when a particular person or place is mentioned
- has trouble developing or maintaining relationships
- cries for no obvious reason
- has nightmares
- has low self-esteem
- is confused about their sexual identity.

Changes in behaviour

You might notice that your child:

- is dressing differently
- has clothing, shoes, bags, jewellery or electronics from an unknown source
- is showing [problematic sexual behaviour](#), including getting involved in risky sexual behaviour
- starts to have problems with alcohol or other drugs
- is driving erratically
- is cutting themselves or [self-harming](#) in other ways
- spends a lot of time online and is secretive about online communications
- is eating more or less
- has problems sleeping.

Changes in school and social life

You might notice that your child:

- is spending more time on their own than usual
- has changed friendship groups
- is avoiding particular people or places, like a friend's house or a sports group
- is avoiding activities or events that they previously enjoyed, or asks questions like 'Do I have to go to music today?'
- is doing less well at school.

Physical signs

You might notice your child has:

- swelling or redness in the genital area
- pain when going to the toilet
- difficulty walking or sitting
- bruises on soft parts of their body, like buttocks or thighs
- symptoms of a urinary tract infection, like burning while going to the toilet
- symptoms of a sexually transmitted infection, like discharge from the penis or vagina
- missed a period.

What do I need to make a report?

Make your report immediately to child protective services or law enforcement and include:

- Name of the alleged victim
- Age of the child
- Address where the child can be located
- Contact information for the child's parents or caregivers, if known
- Types of abuse or neglect suspected
- Reason for making the report, including specific signs of maltreatment and whether it is part of an ongoing pattern
- Other children in the home, if known
- Name of the alleged perpetrator, if known
- The emergency nature of the report and whether the child is in imminent danger
- Name, phone number, and address of the reporter

When known, the following should also be shared with child protective services:

- Exact time the child disclosed abuse, if there was a disclosure
- Whether the perpetrator is aware of the report whether the non-offending parent was notified of the report
- Last occurrence of the offense

