



# Sexual Abuse Indicators And Recommended Actions

There are seldom witnesses to child sexual abuse, so caregivers must make themselves aware of the ways children might "tell" about sexual abuse.

**STATEMENTS** made by the child of sexual acts committed upon him/her are the most reliable indicators of sexual abuse. However, many children do not tell in words that they have been sexually abused. Often the reason they don't tell is because they think no one will believe them, or they are afraid of what might happen to them as a result of telling. Children may fear that they will be blamed for the abuse and that something bad will happen if they tell. This may have been reinforced by the offender, who may have threatened, "You will get into trouble if you tell" or "You will be sent away and I'll have to go to jail."

Children may not have the words to tell, or don't know what to say. They may use vague terms, such as: "I don't like Mr. Jones anymore" or, "Mr. Smith wears funny underwear." The offender may have told them that "it's O.K." or that "it's our special secret".

**PHYSICAL EVIDENCE** of sexual abuse includes\*:

- Venereal disease (in mouth, vagina, urethra or rectum)
- Anal/Oral/Genital tissue trauma (bruising, bleeding or other damage)
- Presence of foreign objects in some opening of the body
- Pregnancy in adolescent females

\*A physician should see a child as soon as possible in these situations.

Most often, a child will not tell in words, but by a change in behavior. **BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS** include\*\*:

- Difficulty in walking or sitting
- Sexual knowledge beyond child's age
- Manipulative or seductive-appearing attention-seeking behavior
- Fearful behavior towards certain individuals
- Excessive masturbatory behavior in small children (masturbation itself is normal behavior in children)
- Eating, sleeping, toileting disturbances
- Excessive crying, irritability, crankiness
- Regressive behavior (returning to younger, more babyish behavior)
- Psychosomatic complaints (stomachaches, headaches, etc.)
- Problems in school (inability to concentrate) or not wanting to go home
- Lots of new fears, clinging behavior
- Lack of friends, withdrawal from others
- Acting out behaviors (aggression, truancy, running away, stealing, lying, etc.)
- Promiscuity
- Prostitution
- Self-destructive behaviors (substance abuse, eating disorders, suicide gestures, cutting or burning oneself)
- Depression
- Alienation from other family members

\*\*The majority of these signals are some general indicators that the child may be troubled, though not necessarily about sexual abuse. They are signs of upset that arise sometimes during stressful life events, such as a divorce, a new sibling, or a move.

Each of these "signals" should be taken seriously-professional evaluation may be indicated. Parents who follow up such indicators demonstrate support for the child, and may well interrupt a serious situation from developing.



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Learning that your child has been assaulted is a crisis. It can be overwhelming. It is important not to panic or to overreact. Keep the focus on the child's need for help and support.

### **What to do immediately:**

- Go with the child to a private place. Reassure him/her that you are glad she/he told you and that she/he did the right thing by telling.
- Gently ask the child to tell you what happened in his/her own words. Tell them it is OK to go slowly, but don't pressure the child to talk.
- Let the child know you believe him/her.
- Let the child know you are sorry about what happened to him/her. Try to keep your own feelings separate from those of your child. Avoid angry threats about what you think should happen to the offender-the child may be mixed up about how he/she feels toward the abuser and may only be confused or frightened by your reaction.
- Let the child know it is not his/her fault. Children often feel they have done something wrong or have caused a lot of trouble for the family by telling. Make it clear that the fault lies with the offender e.g., "It's Mr. Smith's fault. He has a problem and needs help."
- Tell the child you will do your best to protect him/her from further molestation. Do not make any promises or any threats at this point. Promising action that may not occur can perpetuate a child's sense of betrayal by an adult.
- If you suspect your child has an injury, contact your regular physician or St. Joseph Hospital's Emergency Room immediately.
- You must alert Child Protective Services (647-6110, 384-1800, 1-800-398-4079) or your local law enforcement agency. They can provide advice and information about what to do.

### **Helping your child following the abuse:**

- Continue to believe in your child and offer reassurance and support.
- Provide consistency of care, and follow regular routines around the house (rules, chores, bedtimes, meals)
- Respond to questions or feelings your child expresses about the abuse with a calm, matter-of-fact attitude, but do not pressure your child to talk about it.
- Respect your child's privacy by not telling other people who do not need to know what happened.
- Consider the need for professional counseling for the child. To ignore the incident or "sweep it under the rug" is not going to help the child deal with the exploitation. The incident is not forgotten, even if it is not discussed. Talking about the experience is as therapeutic for children as it is for adults. Children can be helped to express feelings of fear, anger, shame, guilt, confusion or embarrassment. They can understand what happened was not their fault, and that they are still believed, loved and whole. Therapy groups for children are available and assist them in working through these feelings.
- Find support for yourself with someone you trust-a friend, spouse, clergy person, sexual assault advocate or counselor. Support or therapy groups are available for parents of sexually abused children to explore and express their feelings about the abuse and its effects on themselves and their families.
- **Remember that recovery comes with time, support and the opportunity to acknowledge and express feelings.**