



Indicators of child sexual abuse

An awareness of the indicators of child sexual abuse enables child protection workers to provide a sensitive response to children who may be victims of child sexual abuse. However, child protection workers should consider a child's age and level of maturity and development when interpreting possible indicators of sexual abuse. Indicators may not necessarily be signs of child sexual abuse.

Physical indicators

Genital and anal areas

- bruises, scratches or other injuries not consistent with accidental injury
- itching, soreness, discharge or unexplained bleeding
- painful and frequent urination
- signs of sexually transmitted infections, and
- semen in the vagina, anus or external genitalia or on clothing.

General

- bruises, bite marks or other injuries to breasts, buttocks, lower abdomen or thighs
- difficulty walking or sitting
- torn, stained or bloodied underwear
- pregnancy in adolescents where the identity of the father is vague or secret
- recurrent urinary tract infections
- persistent headaches or recurrent abdominal pain, and
- unexplained pain in the genital area.

Behavioural indicators

Sexual

- over attention to adults of a particular sex
- displaying unusual interest in the genitals of others
- acting out adult sexual behaviour with adults, dolls or other children
- open displays of sexuality, for example, repeated public masturbation
- precocious knowledge of sexual matters, and
- promiscuity, repetitious sexually precocious behaviour.

General

- sudden changes in mood or behaviour
- difficulty sleeping, nightmares
- regressed behaviour -bedwetting, separation anxiety, insecurity
- change in eating patterns including preoccupation with food
- lack of trust in familiar adults, fear of strangers, fear of men
- lack of appropriate role boundaries in family -child fulfils parental role

- acting out behaviour, aggression, lying, stealing, unexplained running away, drug or alcohol abuse, suicide attempts
- Withdrawn behaviour
 - passivity
 - excessive compliance
 - mood swings
 - depression
- learning problems at school, loss of concentration, unexplained drop in school performance
- poor peer relationships, family and/or child appear socially isolated
- reluctance to undress, for example, for school sporting functions
- excessive bathing, and
- inappropriate displays of affection between child and parent (usually father) that appear lover-like rather than parent-like (father may be excessively over-protective towards daughter, restrict her social activities or inquisitive of her sexuality).

Emotional indicators

This may include sudden changes such as:

- anxiety
- arousal (easily startled, overly fearful or overly watchful)
- change in mood
- depression
- emotionless
- fear of particular situations, persons or things
- hopelessness/helplessness
- hyper-activity
- intense fear
- lack of concentration
- lethargy, listless
- memory problems
- nightmares, difficulty sleeping, fear of the dark, and
- smearing of faeces or blood in alleged location of sexual abuse.

Source: Department of Human Services. 2009 *Child sexual abuse - understanding and responding: for professionals working with children who have experience sexual abuse*.
Office for Children, Victoria Government Department of Human Services