

Signs of Sexual Abuse in Children

Many adults expect children to tell us if they have been sexually abused but that is a difficult thing to do. As a matter of fact, I call you to the challenge...the next time you're in a crowd, I want you to pick a person and then go and open a conversation where you tell them the intimate details of your last sexual experience. For them to fully grasp what you experienced, you'll have to tell them in as much detail as possible including exactly what you did, what the other person did, how you felt, if you had an orgasm, if they used any devices. Now just for a moment, in the midst of visualizing yourself telling this story, I want you to picture that you are 6 years old and the last sexual experience you had was with your father. Does this help you to begin to understand why children rarely tell?

As children carry the secret of abuse for months or even years, it can have significant impact on them physically, emotionally, and spiritually and this impact appears as visible signs that we can see. This is why I am encouraging you all to learn to listen with your eyes! Here is what you should be looking for.

Physical Signs of Sexual Abuse

- Evidence of physical trauma: blood, swelling, or tears in the skin around the vagina, penis, or anus
- Complaints of pain or burning during urination or bowel movements
- Exhibiting symptoms of genital or urinary tract infections or STDs: offensive odor, itching, redness, rashes, blisters, or discharge in the genital area or the mouth and throat
- Stress-related illnesses: chronic stomach aches or recurring migraine headaches
- Self-mutilation: pinching themselves, burning themselves with cigarettes, puncturing themselves with pins, or cutting their bodies with knives or razor blades without intending to commit suicide

Emotional or Behavioral Signs of Sexual Abuse

- Anxiety, panic attacks, phobias, and signs of post-traumatic stress disorder
- Extreme fear
- Aggressive behavior toward friends and family
- Withdrawal from friends, family, or activities they previously enjoyed
- Fear of certain people, places, or activities

- Excessive sadness, depression, or suicide attempts
- Decreased school performance
- Eating disorders, loss of appetite, gagging
- Sleep disturbances, nightmares, and screaming
- Regressive behaviors, bedwetting, separation anxiety
- Numbing their pain with alcohol, drugs, or cutting
- Perfection and signs of obsessive-compulsive disorder
- Loss of memory of certain years or large blocks of time

Sexual signs of Sexual Abuse

- Increased questions about human sexuality
- Excessive masturbation or masturbating in public
- Increased sexual play with friends, pets, or toys
- Talking about or acting out specific sexual acts
- Increased choice of sexually revealing clothing or covering up
- Signs of promiscuity
- Teen pregnancy
- Depicting people in a sexual way in pictures

Although your good sense may tell you not to believe rumors, according to experts in the field, it is important to realize that rumors are a good source of information¹ and what you hear from others along with signs of abuse in children are strong indicators that a child may be experiencing sexual abuse. Your response to seeing these signs can vary depending on our relationship with the child and how many signs you see.

At minimum if you know the child, let them know what you see and that you are concerned for them. Tell them that if someone is making them feel scared or uncomfortable, it's okay to tell you or another a trusted adult. If they have to they can even ask a friend to tell a trusted adult. Ask them to name five adults they could tell their deepest secrets to - parents, a teacher, a doctor or nurse, a friend's Mom, etc. Be sure to include people outside the family in case they are being abused at home. Help the child understand they have choices and there are people around them who can help.

While a single sign does not necessarily mean that abuse has occurred, if you see multiple signs, chronic signs, or major changes in behavior, it should be cause for you to suspect abuse has occurred.

Let's look further into the word "suspect" so we are all on the same page. The definition of suspect is to "have an idea or impression of the existence, presence, or truth of (something) without certain proof."² It is not up to you to prove that abuse has taken place before reporting to authorities. You simply have to have an idea or impression that something has taken place.

Former Deputy District Attorney and author, Robin Sax, says, "Reporting your suspicion is not the same as making an accusation. You are just asking the authorities to investigate the possibility that there may be a problem."³ While the law differs by state, all states designate professionals who work with children to be mandated reporters⁴ and the law requires them to report suspicions of abuse, not just incidents where they have facts or hard evidence. Our hope is that every adult would consider it a moral obligation to report abuse, even if they are not required by law.

For more information contact Prevent Child Abuse America at 312-663-3520 or at mailbox@preventchildabuse.org.

1. Shakeshaft, Charol. "Know the warning signs of educatorsexual misconduct." *Kappan Magazine*, February 2013: 8–13. Charol Shakeshaft, "Know the Warning Signs of Educator Sexual Misconduct," *Kappan Magazine* (February 2013): 13.
2. Google Search, accessed August 5, 2014, [google.com/search?q=suspect+definition&dq=suspect+definition&aq=chrome.69i57.2763j0j7&sourceid=chrome&meandes_sm=93&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=suspect+definition&dq=suspect+definition&aq=chrome.69i57.2763j0j7&sourceid=chrome&meandes_sm=93&ie=UTF-8).
3. "Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect (State Statutes Current Through November 2013)," *Child Welfare Information Gateway*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2014): 1, gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/manda.cfm.
4. Robin Sax, *It Happens Every Day: Inside the World of a Sex Crimes DA* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2010), 135.
5. Diane Cranley, *8 Ways to Create their Fate: Protecting the Sexual Innocence of Children in Youth-Serving Organizations* (Mustang: Tate Publishing & Enterprises, LLC, 2015), 340.