

Child Sexual Abuse – How to Identify the Signs in Children

Clara Hinton – Motivational Speaker, Author, and Blogger

Child Sexual Abuse Warning signs

What to look for in adults and children

What is considered child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse includes touching and non-touching activity. Some examples of touching activity include:

- touching a child's genitals or private parts for sexual pleasure
- making a child touch someone else's genitals, play sexual games or have sex putting objects or body parts (like fingers, tongue or penis) inside the vagina, in the mouth or in the anus of a child for sexual pleasure

Some examples of non-touching activity include:

- showing pornography to a child
- deliberately exposing an adult's genitals to a child
- photographing a child in sexual poses
- encouraging a child to watch or hear sexual acts
- inappropriately watching a child undress or use the bathroom

As well as the activities described above, there is also the serious and growing problem of people making and downloading sexual images of children on the Internet. To view child abuse images is to participate in the abuse of a child. Those who do so may also be abusing children they know. People who look at this material need help to prevent their behavior from becoming even more serious.

Warning signs in children and adolescents of possible child sexual abuse

Children often show us rather than tell us that something is upsetting them. There may be many reasons for changes in their behavior, but if we notice a combination of worrying signs it may be time to call for help or advice.

What to watch out for in children:

- Acting out in an inappropriate sexual way with toys or objects
- Nightmares, sleeping problems
- Becoming withdrawn or very clingy
- Becoming unusually secretive
- Sudden unexplained personality changes, mood swings and seeming insecure
- Regressing to younger behaviors, e.g. bedwetting
- Unaccountable fear of particular places or people
- Outburst of anger
- Changes in eating habits
- New adult words for body parts and no obvious source
- Talk of a new, older friend and unexplained money or gifts
- Self-mutilation (cutting or burning) in adolescents
- Physical signs, such as, unexplained soreness or bruises around genitals or mouth, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy

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- Running away
- Not wanting to be alone with a particular child or young person

Any one sign doesn't mean that a child was or is being sexually abused, but the presence of several suggests that you should begin to ask questions and consider seeking help. Keep in mind that some of these signs can emerge at other times of stress such as:

- During a divorce
- Death of a family member or pet
- Problems at school or with friends
- Other anxiety-inducing or traumatic events

Physical warning signs

Physical signs of sexual abuse are rare, however, if you see these signs, take your child to a doctor. Your doctor can help you understand what may be happening and test for sexually transmitted diseases.

- Pain, discoloration, bleeding or discharges in genitals, anus or mouth
- Persistent or recurring pain during urination and bowel movements
- Wetting and soiling accidents unrelated to toilet training

Signs that an adult may be using their relationship with a child for sexual reasons

The signs that an adult is using their relationship with a child for sexual reasons may not be obvious. We may feel uncomfortable about the way they play with the child, or seem always to be favoring them and creating reasons for them to be alone. There may be cause for concern about the behavior of an adult or young person if they:

- Refuse to allow a child sufficient privacy or to make their own decisions on personal matters.
- Insist on physical affection such as kissing, hugging or wrestling even when the child clearly does not want it.
- Are overly interested in the sexual development of a child or teenager.
- Insist on time alone with a child with no interruptions.
- Spend most of their spare time with children and have little interest in spending time with people their own age.
- Regularly offer to baby-sit children for free or take children on overnight outings alone.
- Buy children expensive gifts or give them money for no apparent reason.
- Frequently walk in on children/teenagers in the bathroom.
- Treat a particular child as a favorite, making them feel 'special' compared with others in the family.
- Pick on a particular child.

Child abuse among children and young people

Age appropriate sexual behavior

We all know that children pass through different stages of development as they grow, and that their awareness and curiosity about sexual matters change as they pass from infancy into childhood and then through puberty to adolescence. Each child is an individual and will develop in his or her own way. However, there is a generally accepted range of behaviors linked to a child's age and developmental stage. Sometimes these will involve some exploration with other children of a similar age. It can be difficult to tell the difference between age appropriate sexual

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exploration and warning signs of harmful behavior. Occasionally we may need to explain to children why we would prefer them not to continue with a particular behavior.

This is a chance to talk with them about keeping themselves and others safe and to let them know that you are someone who will listen. Disabled children may develop at different rates, depending on the nature of their disability, and **disabled children can be more vulnerable to abuse**. Children with learning disabilities, for example, may behave sexually in ways that are out of step with their age. Particular care may be needed in educating such children to understand their sexual development and to ensure that they can communicate effectively about any worries they have.

It is important to recognize that while people from different backgrounds have different expectations about what is acceptable behavior in children, sexual abuse happens across all races and cultures. Remember that each child develops at his or her own pace and not every child will show the behaviors described below. If you have any worries or questions about a child you know, *talk to someone about it*.

Talk to your school Guidance Counselor.

Call a therapist who specializes in child sexual abuse.

*Note: A referral resource that I have used is Emmanuel Baptist Church in Johnstown. They have the names of some experienced counselors in the field of sexual molestation in children. 814-266-4117

As members of the SAP referral teams, you have local resources that you can use.

Report. Report. Report. Then follow up!

Also, we have an excellent resource who is not used often enough – Officer Ruth Beckner of the Somerset County Police. I can assure you, she will listen to your concerns and she will do follow-up! Remember, this is a child's life we're talking about. It's better to be wrong in your assumption than to ignore the signs and not say anything while the abuse continues!

Pre-school children (0-5) years commonly:

- Use childish 'sexual' language to talk about body parts
- Ask how babies are made and where they come from
- Touch or rub their own genitals
- Show and look at private parts

They rarely:

- *Discuss sexual acts or use sexually explicit language*
- *Have physical sexual contact with other children*
- *Show adult-like sexual behavior or knowledge*

School-age children (6-12) years commonly:

- Ask questions about menstruation, pregnancy and other sexual behavior
- Experiment with other children, often during games, kissing, touching, showing and role playing e.g. moms and dads or doctors and nurses
- Masturbate in private

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They rarely:

- *Masturbate in public*
- *Show adult like sexual behavior or knowledge*

Adolescents:

- Ask questions about relationships and sexual behavior
- Use sexual language and talk between themselves about sexual acts
- Masturbate in private
- Experiment sexually with adolescents of similar age
 - * About one-third of adolescents have sexual intercourse before the age of 16. It is my personal opinion that this number is incorrect. It is much higher.

They rarely:

- *Masturbate in public*
- *Have sexual contact with much younger children or adults*

Warning signs of sexually harmful behavior

One of the hardest things for parents to discover is that their child may have sexually harmed or abused another child. In this situation, denial, shock and anger are normal reactions. If it is not responded to quickly and sensitively, the effect on the whole family can be devastating. For this reason it is vital to contact someone for advice about what to do as soon as you suspect that something is wrong. ***The positive message is that early help for the child or young person and their family can make a real difference.*** Evidence suggests that the earlier children can get help, the more chance there is of preventing them moving on to more serious behavior. It is important to be alert to the early warning signs that something is going wrong.

Therefore, if a parent comes to you and has a worry or concern that this is going on in the home, do not push this information aside. ***Act on it as if it is an emergency because it is!***

Do you know a child or adolescent who:

- Seeks out the company of younger children and spends an unusual amount of time in their company?
- Takes younger children to 'secret' places or hideaways or plays 'special' games with them (e.g. doctor and patient, removing clothing, etc.) especially games unusual to their age?
- Insists on hugging or kissing a child when the child does not want to?
- Tells you they do not want to be alone with a child or becomes anxious when a particular child comes to visit?
- Frequently uses aggressive or sexual language about adults or children?
- Shows sexual material to younger children?
- Makes sexually abusive telephone calls?
- Shares alcohol or drugs with younger children or teens?
- Views child pornography on the internet or elsewhere?
- Exposes his or her genitals to younger children?
- Forces sex on another adolescent or child?

What you can do if you see warning signs in a child at school

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- Report your concerns and document what you have seen and heard
- Do follow-up! Make sure you are certain that the proper channels are being used for reporting and then getting the child properly evaluated
- Be a person the child can trust
- Be vigilant when talking to the parents – often you can pick up on “red flags of child sexual abuse” *Note: A good resource for that is the website: findingahealingplace.com (Married to a Pedophile by Clara Hinton) and also notwithmychild.org

Three quarters of children who are sexually abused do not tell anyone about it and many keep their secret all their lives. Sexual abusers are more likely to be people we know, and could well be people we care about; after all more than 8 out of 10 children who are sexually abused know their abuser. They are family members or friends, neighbors or babysitters – many hold responsible positions in society. *The closer the relationship between the abuser and the victim, the less likely they are to talk about it.*

Children often show us rather than tell us that something is upsetting them so being aware of the signs is vital. (Refer to the information sheet) However, children may give vague hints that something is happening. Their information may not be clear and they may not have the words to explain what is happening to them. The way adults respond to this is vital to ensuring the child’s safety.

Child sexual abuse confuses a child’s thinking and they often retreat into a fake world. That’s the only way of escape that they know. That being said, they may often test you by giving you “clues” that something is very, very wrong. It’s so important for you to be on the lookout for the signs of child molestation!

Respond with care and urgency

If you think a child is trying to tell you about a sexually abusive situation, respond promptly and with care. The police and children’s social services have joint working arrangements for responding to suspected child sexual abuse. They are experienced in this work and will deal sensitively with the child and family.

Believe the child

If a child trusts you enough to tell you about abuse, you must remember that they rarely lie about such things. Although it may be hard to believe that someone we trust or care about is capable of sexually abusing a child, it’s highly unlikely that a child would deliberately make false accusations about adult-like sexual behaviors. This is so important! Remember that child sexual molesters aren’t always the “creepy looking guy hiding behind the bushes”, but can be the kind-hearted grandfather, the giving servant Preacher, the caring, loving babysitter. ***The molester can be anyone, and the hardest fact of all to believe!***

The pressures on the child to keep silent are enormous. It takes tremendous courage to talk about abuse. A child’s claim that sexual abuse did not happen (when it actually did), or taking back a disclosure of abuse are common. Sometimes the child’s account of what happened changes or evolves over time. This is a common pattern for disclosure and should not invalidate their story.

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Be supportive

It is important that they feel supported – don't dismiss their claims or put them off talking about it.

Stay calm

If they are talking to you about it, don't get angry. Stay calm and steady. If you get angry the child may think you are going to punish them – this will play into the hands of the abuser who warned the child not to tell.

Be caring

Make sure the child knows you love them and that they have done nothing wrong – and keep telling them. The child will need to see that adults believe them and they are doing all they can to protect them. Make sure the child knows they were right to talk about it and that you are glad they came to you.

Face the problem

When the abuse is known, adults must face the problem honestly, protect the child at all costs and place responsibility appropriately with the abuser.

Re-establish safety

Do what is necessary to protect the child from further harm.

Get help

Get help from professionals who can help get the child to a place of safety and healing.

Do not despair

Children can and do recover from child sexual abuse. And, this is why getting help is so critical!

What the child may be feeling

Fear

Afraid that the person who abused them will reject or harm them or those they love.

Scared that no one will believe them.

Anxious about what will happen next.

Confused and conflicted

Unsure about whom they can trust.

Feels protective and/or loving toward the person who abused them.

Regrets having told (may even take back the disclosure).

Guilt and shame

Believes they are responsible for the abuse.

Feels guilt about upsetting the family by telling.

Feels ashamed if they experienced positive physical sensations.

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Hope and relief

Is relieved that the burden of secrecy has been lifted.
Feels hopeful that the abuse will now stop.

Sexual abuse or incest within the family

When a child is abused by another family member, each family member is affected. Typically, the help of outside specialists is needed to address the emotional toll on the family and to assist the healing process of each individual.

Not a day goes by anymore without reading of a child being sexually molested. I believe a number of things have added to this – the most significant thing being the availability of porn and kiddie porn on the internet. We don't have to look far to find abuse. Guaranteed everyone sitting in this room knows more than one child who is the victim of abuse.

I'm passionate about being a voice for these children. They can't win this battle alone. They don't even know how to identify the fears and pain that they are holding within.
They need us to keep them safe!

If you are interested in more knowledge, I'd strongly suggest you reading the following books:

Not with My Child – Combating What Predators Do to Sexually Abuse and Silence Children -- The book can be bought on Amazon

Conversations With a Pedophile – In the Interest of Our Children – by Dr. Amy Hammel-Zabin -- Can be purchased on Amazon

These books are invaluable resources and guides.

Get to know your local agencies who work with child sexual abuse. When I found out about my ex-husband a call was immediately made to Officer Beckner. From there, I was given guidance as to what my next step was in making sure the perpetrator, my ex-husband, was taken off of the streets to keep from further harming children.

Unfortunately, I've found the issue of getting children victims and adult victims the help they need is often a long, tedious process. There simply aren't enough trained professionals to go around! And, that's frustrating!

Don't give up! Keep fighting for the children! They need you!

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If I can be of further help to you, please don't hesitate to email me at:

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