

Early Warning Signs & Symptoms of Child Sexual Abuse

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is any kind of sexual act or behavior with a child including contact and non-contact events (e.g., taking pornographic images of a child). Children experiencing sexual abuse may exhibit physical and emotional signs or symptoms. **Physical signs are less common**, and when found, should be immediately investigated. **Emotional or behavioral signs are more likely** but may also be symptoms of other trauma in a child's life, such as physical abuse, neglect, or parents' divorce or separation. It is also important to keep in mind that some children **exhibit no signs whatsoever**.

Physical Signs

Direct Physical Signs of CSA are less common and include:

- Bruising, bleeding, redness and bumps, or scabs around the mouth, genitals, or anus
- Vaginal or rectal cuts, tears, or pain
- Urinary tract infections, sexually transmitted infections, and abnormal vaginal or penile discharge
- Any unexplained injury (bruise, burn, fracture, abdominal, genital, or head injury)

CSA victims are more likely to exhibit *Indirect Physical Signs* such as:

- Persistent or reoccurring pain during urination or bowel movements
- Chronic stomach pain and headaches with no medical cause
- Bedwetting or accidents unrelated to toilet training

Emotional and Behavioral Signs

- Abnormal and unusual sexual behaviors and language that are not age-appropriate
- Unusual fear of certain people or places; reluctance to be alone with a certain person
- Nightmares, night terrors, or other disturbances in sleep
- Thinking of self or body as "dirty" or "bad"
- Changes in eating habits, which may include over-eating or stealing food
- A shift in disposition or mood resulting in anger or aggressiveness towards family, friends, or pets
- Regression to "outgrown" behavior-, such as thumb sucking, bedwetting etc.
- Poor self-esteem and avoidance of relationships
- A shift in disposition or mood resulting in anxiety or depression
- Rebellious behavior
- Change in attitude towards school, change in hobbies or interests
- Withdrawal
- Attempts to runaway
- Too "perfect" behavior or overly compliant behavior
- Self-harm, such as biting self, scratching self, pulling out hair, or cutting

Do NOT overlook signs and symptoms. If you or someone you know suspects child abuse, please contact your local law enforcement agency or [department of social services](#). The [Darkness to Light National Child Sexual Abuse Helpline](#) can provide local resources and information at 1-866-FOR-LIGHT. You can also contact the [ChildHelp USA National Child Abuse Hotline](#) at 1-800-4-A-CHILD for 24/7 support. For more information or additional resources, visit <https://mcasa.org/prevention/preventing-child-sexual-abuse> or call 301-328-7023.