



Indicators of Child Sexual Abuse in Young Children

Sexual behavior or knowledge inappropriate to child's age or developmental level:

- Open sexual behavior (ages 5 and up).
- Excessive masturbation
- Engaging of animals or toys in sexual activities.
- Touching other children or adults in sexual ways.
- Exposing private parts
- Sexualized postures
- Sexual words or references to sexual acts.
- Excessive curiosity about sex.

Toileting or genital problems:

- Regression to earlier stages (bed wetting).
- Urinate or defecates in places other than the toilet or in front of others.
- Fear of going into the bathroom.
- Frequent urinary/vaginal infections.
- Vaginal irritation or complaints (itching).

Sleep disturbances:

- Frequent nightmares
- Night terrors (crying that can't be stopped).
- Excessive sleep
- Refusal to go to bed.
- Fear of sleeping in certain places.

Food disturbances:

- Vomit after eating
- Eats gross things
- Eat too much or too little

Phobic response:

- Extremely scared of something or someone.

Bathing disturbances:

- Afraid to take baths.
- Obsessive bathing

Clothing disturbances:

- Wears too many clothes
- Refuses to wear certain clothes/or pajamas.

Behavior changes:

- Violence in play.
- Withdrawal
- Peer relationship problems

- Mood swings
- Depression
- Self destructive behavior (inflicting pain on self).
- Regression in developmental milestones.
- Clinging/whining to a particular person (non-abusive parent/person).
- Tantrums
- Vague somatic complaints (headaches, stomach aches, sore throat, pain in private areas).

The following symptoms are lower probability indicators of sexual abuse because they can also be indicators of other types of trauma (death of a loved one, divorce, child-abuse, neglect).

Nonsexual Behavioral Indicators of Possible Sexual Abuse in young children: sleep disturbances, regressive behavior, self destructive or risk taking behavior, impulsivity or distractibility, refusal to be left alone, fear of people of specific gender, fear offender, fire-setting (mostly boys), and cruelty to animals. Older children: eating disturbances (anorexia or bulimia), running away, self-destructive (suicidal gestures, attempts, self-mutilation), criminal activity, school difficulties, and depression and/or social withdrawal.

Sexually abused children may manifest a range of symptoms, which reflects the specifics of their abuse and how they are coping with it. Suspicion is heightened when the child presents with several indicators, particularly when there is a combination of sexual and non-sexual indicators. For example, a common configuration in female adolescent victims is promiscuity, substance abuse and suicidal behavior.

The DOVE Program reminds you that though these are some of the common indicators, every child is different and the absence of a history of these indicators does not signal the absence of sexual abuse. Similarly, physical and psychosocial indicators may be noted in a child by many people, but a definitive determination is generally made by a medical professional and/or mental health professional.

For more information, please contact the White Earth DOVE Program at 218.935.5554 or call our 24 Hour Crisis Line at 1.877.830.DOVE. There are people and resources to help!

Child Welfare Information Gateway