
SEXUAL AND NONSEXUAL BEHAVIORAL SIGNS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE*

You should be more suspicious of sexual abuse when a child displays several signs, especially a combination of sexual and nonsexual signs.

SEXUAL SIGNS

Sexual signs are generally higher probability signs; in other words, these signs mean it is more likely that the child was sexually abused. Lower probability signs may indicate the child was sexually abused, but the child may display these signs for reasons other than sexual abuse. Sexual signs vary somewhat depending on the child's age and development. The signs are divided into those likely to be found in younger children (10 years of age or under) who have been sexually abused, and older children (over the age of 10) who have been sexually abused. It is important to remember that this is somewhat arbitrary because within these two age ranges there are children at very different levels of development.

SEXUAL BEHAVIORS FOUND IN YOUNGER CHILDREN

Signs of Sexual Knowledge Not Ordinarily Possessed by Young Children

The following are very strong signs that a child has been sexually abused because young children generally do not have the sexual knowledge to do the following:

- Sexual behavior with other people.
 - Sexual aggression toward younger or more naive children. By behaving in this way, the child is identifying with the abuser.
 - Aggressive or playful sexual behavior with peers. Such behavior indicates the child experienced a degree of pleasure from the abusive activity.
 - Sexual invitations to older persons. This behavior suggests the child expects and accepts sexual activity as a way of relating to adults.

* Adapted from Faller, *Sexual Abuse Intervention and Treatment Issues*. User Manual Series. National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. In press.

- Sexual behavior with animals or toys.
 - A child may suck a dog's penis.
 - A child makes dolls have oral sex.
- Advanced (precocious) sexual knowledge.
 - A child seeing a couple kissing on television says, "The man is going to put his finger in her 'wee.' "
 - A child says, "You know, snot comes out of Uncle Joe's ding dong when he rubs it."

The reason sexual knowledge is more unusual for younger children than older ones is that older children may get sexual knowledge from other sources, for example, through peers and classes on sex education. Even younger children may obtain sexual knowledge from sources other than abuse. However, children are not likely to learn the intimate details of sexual activity, such as what semen tastes like or looks like and what penetration feels like, without direct experience.

Excessive Masturbation

Another sign of sexual abuse often cited is too much masturbation. A caution regarding this sign is that most children and adults masturbate at some time. It is normal behavior, and it is only considered a sign of sexual abuse when excessive. The following guidelines may be helpful to decide what is "too much."

- Child masturbates to the point of soreness or injury.
- Child masturbates numerous times a day.
- Child cannot stop masturbating.
- Child inserts objects into vagina or anus.
- Child makes groaning or moaning sounds when masturbating.
- Child engages in thrusting motions while masturbating.
- Child gets "lost" in masturbation, as if in a trance.

SEXUAL SIGNS FOUND IN OLDER CHILDREN

As children grow older, they become aware of people's responses to their sexual activity, so the sexual actions described above become less common. Also some sexual activity is normal for adolescents. However, there are four sexual signs that may point to sexual abuse:

- Sexual promiscuity among both boys and girls
- Being sexually victimized by peers or non-family members
- Adolescent prostitution
- Molesting younger children

STRONG SIGNS FOR ALL CHILDREN

When young (preteen) children report that they have been sexually abused, there is a high probability they are telling the truth. Rarely do young children make false accusations. So, unless there is information that the child is lying, the child's disclosure of sexual abuse is usually a good sign that the child is telling the truth. Teenage children do have a higher rate of false accusation, but the majority of teens also allege valid accusations.

NONSEXUAL BEHAVIORAL SIGNS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Nonsexual behaviors are lower probability signs of sexual abuse because they can also be signs of other types of trauma. For example, they can be caused by physical abuse, parents' marital conflict or substance abuse. They can also arise because of such events as the birth of a sibling or the death of a loved one.

Nonsexual Behavioral Signs in Young Children

- Sleep disturbances
- Bed-wetting (enuresis)
- Uncontrolled bowels (encopresis)
- Refusal to be left alone

- Fear of the alleged offender
- Fire setting (more characteristic of males)
- Cruelty to animals (more characteristic of males)

Nonsexual Behavioral Signs in Older Children

- Eating disturbances (bulimia and anorexia)
- Running away (more characteristic of females)
- Alcohol or other drug abuse
- Self-destructive behavior
 - Suicidal gestures, attempts and successes
 - Self-mutilation
- Disobedience
- Criminal activity
- Post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression

Nonsexual Behavioral Signs in All Children

- Frequent daydreaming (dissociation)
- Problems relating to peers
- School difficulties