

# Signs of Possible Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse cases can be very difficult to recognize because instances where definitive, objective evidence exists are the exception rather than the rule. The first indicators of sexual abuse may not be physical signs, but emotional/behavioral changes or abnormalities. And, because it is usually so difficult to accept that sexual abuse may be occurring, even an involved, caring adult may misinterpret the signals.

Sexual abuse is usually discovered by either direct disclosure (i.e., statements from the victim, a member of the victim's family or a parent seeking help) or by indirect methods (i.e., someone comes forward who has witnessed the abuse, the child contracts a sexually transmitted disease or the child becomes pregnant).

Children often do not tell us in words that they have been sexually abused. In addition to little or no knowledge of the terminology of sexual abuse, there are many reasons children might hesitate or be afraid to tell us about what has happened. These include: their relationship to the offender (often an authority figure within or outside of the family); fear of the consequences of revealing the situation due to the fear of retaliation by the offender; or uncertainty about whether or not they will be believed even by their parents, teachers or other adults they respect.

Children need to know that they can speak openly to a trusted adult, and that they will be believed. Children who are victims of sexual abuse should always be reassured that they are not responsible for what has happened to them. They should not feel ashamed or guilty, as the shame and guilt rightfully belong to the perpetrator.

While there may be one or several signs of sexual abuse evidenced by direct or indirect disclosure, the actual diagnosis of physical abuse is best left to a pediatric physician while the treatment of emotional, psychological and behavioral symptoms is best handled by a licensed psychiatrist, psychologist or clinical social worker who specializes in abuse cases.

We must recognize that despite our desire to protect children, the majority of us are not experts in the identification of child sexual abuse. However, we all must be aware of signs of possible sexual abuse. As non-medical personnel those signs that might be most apparent to us, especially parents, teachers and counselors, would be the emotional/behavioral signs of abuse. The Archdiocese of Atlanta is providing the following guidelines for all personnel in an effort to increase everyone's awareness of the possibility of abuse.

Signs that indicate that sexual abuse may have occurred include:

- Actual reports that sexual abuse has occurred
- Apprehension when others cry
- Assumption by a child of adult responsibilities and concerns
- Change in performance at school
- Sleep problems, including: insomnia, nightmares, and refusal to sleep alone or sudden insistence on a night-light
- Delinquency or running away from home
- Truancy from school
- Difficulty forming new relationships

- Difficulty retaining old friends
- Talk of hurting oneself
- Actual self-abuse (This includes alcohol or drug addiction, self-mutilation and suicide attempts)
- An attitude that he/she deserves punishment
- Excessive eating/lack of appetite
- Inappropriate sexual behavior, i.e., excessive masturbation or sexual acting-out with younger children
- An impaired ability to trust
- More generalized fear
- Hyperactive/disruptive behavior
- Failure to thrive socially or physically
- Wariness of adult contact, fear of a specific adult or an entire gender of adults
- Afraid to go home or to those locations where the suspected perpetrator may be (church, school, youth group, scouts, teams)
- A self-concept that gets worse
- Self-imposed isolation
- Sudden use of sexual terms or new names for body parts
- Sudden change in personality
- Discomfort with or complete rejection of typical family affection
- Regressive behaviors, including: thumb sucking; bed-wetting; infantile behaviors or other signs of dependency
- Extreme clinginess or other signs of fearfulness
- Change in personal hygiene habits, excessive cleanliness/lack of cleanliness

**None of these signs listed above should be viewed in isolation. Any one of the previous signs could indicate that there has been a sexual assault or be indicative of another problem. In general, when you see a dramatic change in behavior in a child, it is a signal that something is wrong. Whatever has caused the change in behavior should be explored by parents and trained professionals.**

## **Helpful and Harmful Reactions to Disclosure of Sexual Abuse**

At the time of a child or adult victim's disclosure, the listener's reaction will play a very large part in how the survivor heals from the abuse experience.

The most important and helpful reaction is to accept and acknowledge the survivor's experience. The most harmful reaction that a person can give is verbal disbelief; this communicates that the survivor's internal sense of right and wrong is not to be trusted. Reactions such as, "How could this happen?" and questions such as, "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" can unintentionally intensify feelings of blame and guilt. When adults directly or indirectly blame the survivor for causing the abuse, they are, in effect, excusing the perpetrator.

It has been found that, in general, sexually abused children recant disclosures and information when they feel that what they have said is not accepted or heard by significant adults.