



## What are the Warning Signs of Child Abuse?

Unfortunately, many children will not disclose their abuse. “Children are often threatened or coerced by perpetrators into remaining silent and are frightened of the consequences if they disclose the abuse”<sup>1</sup>. However, children suffering from abuse will exhibit warning signs either physically, or behaviourally, or both.

The presence of the following indicators should alert us to the possibility that a child is being abused<sup>2</sup>. “A single indicator can be as important an indicator as the presence of several indicators”<sup>3</sup>. However, it is also important to note that these indicators are not evidence of the actual occurrence of child abuse, as some of these indicators may be related to other problems in a child’s life<sup>4</sup>.

### 1. Indicators of physical abuse from children

#### a) Physical<sup>5</sup>:

- Bruises, burns, sprains, dislocations, bites, cuts and welts.
- Fractured bones, especially in an infant where a fracture is unlikely to occur accidentally.
- Poisoning.
- Internal injuries.
- Shaking injuries.
- Strangulation.

#### b) Behavioural<sup>6</sup>:

- Express little or no emotion when hurt.
- Offers unlikely explanations for injuries.
- Wears long sleeved clothes on hot days.
- Demonstrates a fear of parents or other adults.
- Is fearful when other children cry or shout out.
- Is excessively friendly to strangers.
- Is passive and compliant.
- Is nervous, hyperactive, aggressive, or disruptive.
- Tells someone that physical harm has occurred.

## **2. Indicators of emotional/psychological abuse from children.**

### a) Physical<sup>7</sup>:

- Speech disorders.
- Delays in physical development.
- Failure to thrive.

### b) Behavioural<sup>8</sup>:

- Has low self esteem.
- Exhibits unexplained mood swings.
- Exhibits age inappropriate behaviours, for instance overly adult or overly infantile.
- Is withdrawn, passive, or tearful.
- Exhibits aggressive or demanding behaviour.
- Is highly anxious.
- Has difficulty relating to adults and peers.

## **3. Indicators of sexual abuse from children.**

### a) Physical (some may only be identifiable through medical examination)<sup>9</sup>:

- Bruises, scratches, or other injuries not consistent with accidental injury in either genital or anal areas.
- Inflammation, itching, soreness, discharge, or unexplained bleeding from either genital or anal areas.
- Painful and frequent urination.
- Signs of sexually transmitted infections.
- Semen in the vagina, anus or external genitalia or on clothing.
- Bruises, bite marks, or other injuries to breasts, buttocks, lower abdomen or thighs.
- Difficulty walking or sitting.
- Torn, stained, or bloodied underwear.
- Pregnancy of adolescents where the identity of the father is vague or secret.
- Recurrent urinary tract infections.
- Persistent headaches or recurrent abdominal pain.
- Unexplained pain in the genital area.

### b) Behavioural<sup>10</sup>:

- Over attention to adults of a particular sex.
- Displaying unusual interest in the genitals of others.
- Acting out sexual behaviour with adults, dolls or other children.
- Open displays of sexuality, for example, repeated public masturbation.
- Precocious knowledge of sexual matters.
- Promiscuity, repetitious sexually precocious behaviour.
- Sudden changes in mood or behaviour.
- Difficulty sleeping and nightmares.

- Regressed behaviour, for example bedwetting, separation anxiety, insecurity.
- Change in eating patterns including preoccupation with food.
- Lack of trust in familiar adults, fear of strangers, fear of men.
- Acting out behaviour – aggression, lying, stealing, unexplained running away, drug or alcohol abuse, suicide attempts.
- Withdrawn behaviour such as passivity, excessive compliance, mood swings or depression.
- Learning problems at school, loss of concentration, unexplained drop in school performance.
- Poor peer relationships, family and/or child appear socially isolated.
- Tells someone that sexual abuse has occurred.
- Reluctance to undress, for example, for school sporting functions.
- Excessive bathing.
- Inappropriate displays of affection between child and caregiver that appear ‘lover-like’.

#### **4. Indicators of neglect from children.**

##### a) Physical<sup>11</sup>:

- Frequent hunger.
- Malnutrition.
- Poor hygiene.
- Inappropriate clothing.
- Unsupervised for long periods.
- Medical needs not attended to.
- Abandonment by parents or guardians.
- Failure to thrive.

##### b) Behavioural<sup>12</sup>:

- Steals food.
- Stays at school outside school hours.
- Is often tired, falls asleep in class.
- Abuses alcohol or drugs.
- Displays aggressive behaviour.
- Is not relating well to peers.
- Is indiscriminate with affection.

## **How to respond to a situation where you suspect child abuse**

“Children are a powerless group within society, and it is relatively easy to violate their rights”<sup>13</sup>. For this reason, “they do not have the power to stop abuse. They rely on others to help them. The responsibility for making sure that children are safe and that their needs are met is shared between the family, the general community, community agencies, professionals working with children, police and government”<sup>14</sup>. If you currently suspect that a child is being abused then that responsibility lies with you. “If adults do not act the abuse is likely to continue and the child is likely to experience life-long effects”<sup>15</sup>. Therefore it is important that you contact a state government 24 hour child protection crisis line which is available in all states and territories of Australia, in Victoria the toll free number is 131 278 and report your suspicions.

## **What if a child discloses abuse to you?**<sup>16</sup>

When a child discloses abuse, they may be feeling scared, guilty, ashamed, angry and powerless. You in turn, may feel a sense of outrage, disgust and sometimes disbelief<sup>17</sup>. The way you respond will be extremely important, it has taken a lot of trust and courage for the child to disclose this type of information with you. You can show the child you care by:

- 1) Listening carefully to what they are saying<sup>18</sup>.
- 2) Telling the child that you believe them.
- 3) Making it clear that whatever has happened is not the child’s fault. Tell the child that some adults do wrong things and that the abuser is responsible for the abuse.
- 4) Reassuring the child that they did the right thing in telling you. Be mindful that many abusers threaten the child to prevent disclosure.
- 5) Do everything possible to comfort and reassure the child. Explain what action you will take next. Do not make promises that you will not be able to keep, nor promise the child confidentiality. The child has enough secrets and needs someone to act on their behalf to stop the abuse.
- 6) Be clear about your role. Report your concerns to the appropriate authorities. Either contact the police for concerns that are life threatening or a 24 hour child protection crisis line which is available in all states and territories, in Victoria the toll free number is 131 278.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Child Protection and Care. (2000). *Child sexual abuse: Understanding and responding*. Victorian Government Department of Human Services. Vic. P 11.
- <sup>2</sup> Office for Children. (2006). *What is child abuse*. State Government of Victoria. Available online at [www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au](http://www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au)
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Child Protection and Care. Op Cit. P 11.
- <sup>5</sup> All indicators of physical child abuse have been sourced from Department of Human Services. (2002). *Responding to child abuse*. Victorian Government Publishing Service. Vic. P 8 unless otherwise stated.
- <sup>6</sup> All indicators of behavioral physical child abuse have been sourced from Department of Human Services. Op Cit. P 8 unless otherwise stated.
- <sup>7</sup> All indicators of physical emotional child abuse have been sourced from Department of Human Services. Op Cit. P 9 unless otherwise stated.
- <sup>8</sup> All indicators of physical child abuse have been sourced from Department of Human Services. Op Cit. P 10 unless otherwise stated.
- <sup>9</sup> All indicators of physical child sexual abuse indicators have been sourced from Child Protection and Care. Op Cit. P 12 unless stated otherwise.
- <sup>10</sup> All indicators of behavioural child sexual abuse indicators have been sourced from Child Protection and Care. Op Cit. P 12-13 unless stated otherwise.
- <sup>11</sup> All indicators of physical child abuse have been sourced from Department of Human Services. Op Cit. P 10 unless otherwise stated.
- <sup>12</sup> All indicators of physical child abuse have been sourced from Department of Human Services. Op Cit. P 10 unless otherwise stated.
- <sup>13</sup> Zwi, K. & Henry, R. (2005). 'Children in Australian society'. *Medical Journal of Australia*. 183 (3): 154-160.
- <sup>14</sup> Department of Human Services. Op Cit. P 1.
- <sup>15</sup> Child Protection and Care. Op Cit. P 14.
- <sup>16</sup> All information taken from Child Protection and Care. Op Cit. P 15-16 unless otherwise stated.
- <sup>17</sup> Department of Human Services. Op Cit. P 11.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid. P 11.