

Signs of Child Abuse & Neglect



Signs of Physical Abuse

Children often have minor bumps and bruises. Physical abuse may be indicated by injuries in various stages of healing or by a series of injuries. Signs of physical abuse may include:

- Bruises, welts or abrasions, especially to the head or face;
- Burns, especially in patterns or lines, small, circular burns, rope burns;
- Fractures and dislocations, especially in children under two years; and
- Delays in seeking medical attention.

Signs of Neglect

Neglect may best be identified by looking at the overall emotional and physical well-being of a child. Does the child often appear unkempt and uncared for? Signs of neglect may include:

- Inadequate clothing for the weather;
- Children who often appear hungry, listless, and tired;
- Frequently unattended physical or medical needs (hair, teeth, eyes, ears);
- Inadequate supervision or child care arrangements that place the child at risk; and
- Irregular attendance at school.

Signs of Sexual Abuse

Four main areas of a child's body may show signs of sexual abuse: the vagina, the penis, the anus, and the mouth. Or sexual abuse may leave no physical signs at all.

Sexual abuse is difficult to identify because children often are abused by a parent, relative, or caregiver who has threatened the child into "keeping the secret." Signs of sexual abuse may include:

- Bruising, sores, or injuries to the genital area;
- Detailed knowledge of sexual behaviour inappropriate to the child's age;
- Acting out sexual behaviour during play;
- Venereal disease;
- Anxiety, hopelessness, depression;
- Self-mutilation;
- Drug and alcohol abuse;
- Running away from home;
- Promiscuity, prostitution;
- Pregnancy; and
- Suicidal behaviours.

Signs of Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse destroys a child's self-image. Keep in mind that emotional abuse may accompany other forms of abuse, including sexual or physical abuse or neglect. Emotional abuse includes clusters of both physical and behavioural symptoms and occurs over a period of time.

However, some of the following signs may also be an indication of other kinds of upset in a child's life, such as loss of a pet, illness, or death in the family. Signs of emotional abuse may include:

How to contact Child Protection (cont.)

- Sleep disturbances;
- Physical complaints with no medical basis (headache, nausea, pain, muscle twitches, stomachaches);
- Behaviour inappropriate to age (acting younger or older than their stage of development);
- Acting out behaviour (aggressive or out-of-control);
- Overly compliant behaviour (anxious to please);
- Low self-esteem; and
- Depression or suicide attempts.

Responding to a Disclosure

- Listen to the child as openly, calmly, and quietly as you can.
- Don't make promises you can't keep.

Tell the child:

- That you believe them;
- That you are glad they told you;
- That it is not their fault;
- That you will do your best to find help; and
- That you cannot keep this information a secret (it is the law that this information must be reported).

Then:

- Immediately report the disclosure to local child protection services.

Taken from Child Abuse: Awareness Information for People in the Workplace, *Health Canada, 1995.*