

SEXUAL ABUSE TIPSHEET

There are two (2) categories of sexual abuse indicators:

1. Sexual indicators, generally being higher probability indicators; and
2. Nonsexual behavior indicators usually considered lower probability.

SEXUAL INDICATORS

Sexual indicators vary somewhat depending on the child's age. The discussion of these indicators will be divided into those likely to be found in younger sexually abused children, aged ten (10) or younger, and those likely to be found in older sexually abused children, older than age ten (10). However, this distinction is somewhat arbitrary, and within these two (2) groups there are children at very different developmental stages. Finally, indicators that are important for children of all ages are noted.

Sexual Indicators Found in Younger Children

These behaviors are high-probability indicators because they represent sexual knowledge not ordinarily possessed by young children.

Statements indicating precocious sexual knowledge, often made inadvertently:

- A child observes a couple kissing on television and says that "the man is going to put his finger in her wee wee."
- A child comments, "You know snot comes out of Uncle Joe's ding dong."
- Sexually explicit drawings (not open to interpretation).
- Child draws a picture of fellatio.
- Sexual interaction with other people.
- Sexual aggression toward younger or more naïve children (represents an identification with the abuser).
- Sexual activity with peers (indicates the child probably experienced a degree of pleasure from the abusive activity).
- Sexual invitations or gestures to older persons (suggests the child expects and accepts sexual activity as a way of relating to adults).
- Sexual interactions involving animals or toys.

The reason sexual knowledge is more compelling when demonstrated by younger children than older ones is that the latter may acquire sexual knowledge from other sources, for example, from classes on sex education or from discussion with peer or older children. Even younger children may obtain knowledge from sources other than abuse. However, children are not likely to learn the intimate details of sexual activity, for example, what semen tastes like and penetration feels like without direct experience.

Another indicator often cited is excessive masturbation. A limitation of this is an index of sexual abuse is that most children (and adults) masturbate at some time. Thus, it is developmentally normal behavior, which is only considered indicative of sexual abuse when "excessive." However, a determination that the masturbation is excessive may be highly subjective. The following guidelines may be helpful.

Masturbation is indicative of possible sexual abuse if the child:

- Masturbates to the point of injury.

- Masturbates numerous times a day.
- Cannot stop masturbating.
- Inserts objects into vagina or anus.
- Makes groaning or moaning sounds while masturbating.
- Engages in thrusting motions while masturbating.

Sexual Indicators Found in Older Children

As children mature, they become aware of societal responses to their sexual activity, and therefore overt sexual interactions of the type cited above are less common. Moreover, some level of sexual activity is considered normal for adolescents. However, there are three (3) indicators that *may* signal sexual abuse:

1. Sexual promiscuity among girls.
2. Being sexually victimized by peers or non-family members among girls.
3. Adolescent prostitution.

Of these three indicators, the last is most compelling. One study found that ninety percent (90%) of female adolescent prostitutes were sexually abused. Although there has not been comparable research on male adolescent prostitutes, there are clinical observations that they become involved in prostitutions because of sexual abuse.

A High-Probability Sexual Indicator for All Children

Finally, when children report to anyone they are being or have been sexually abused, there is a high probability they are telling the truth. Only in rare circumstances do children have any interest in making false allegations. False allegations by children represent between one (1) and five (5) percent of all reports. Therefore, unless there is substantial evidence that the statement is false, it should be interpreted as a good indication that the child has, in fact, been sexually abused.

NON-SEXUAL BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS OF POSSIBLE SEXUAL ABUSE

The reason that nonsexual behavioral symptoms are lower probability indicators of sexual abuse is because they can also be indicators of other types of trauma. For example, these symptoms can be a consequence of physical maltreatment, marital discord, emotional maltreatment, or familial substance abuse. Nonsexual behavioral indicators can arise because of the birth of a sibling, death of a loved one, or parental loss of employment. Moreover, natural disasters such as floods or earthquakes can result in such symptomatic behavior. As with sexual behaviors, it is useful to divide symptoms into those more characteristic of younger children and those found primarily in older children. However, there are also some symptoms found in both age groups.

Nonsexual Behavioral Indicators Found in Younger Children

The following symptoms may be found in younger children:

Sleep Disturbance.

- Enuresis (incontinence of urine).
- Encopresis (fecal soiling).
- Self-destructive or risk-taking behavior.
- Impulsivity, distractibility, difficulty concentrating (without a history of nonabusive etiology).

- Refusal to be left alone.
- Fear of alleged offender.
- Fear of people of a specific type or gender.
- Firesetting (more characteristic of male victims).
- Cruelty to animal (more characteristic of male victims).
- Role reversal in the family or pseudomaturity.

Nonsexual Behavioral Indicators Found in Older Children

- Eating disturbances (bulimia and anorexia).
- Running away.
- Substance Abuse.
- Self-Destructive Behavior, e.g. (suicidal gestures, attempts/successes, and self-mutilation).
- Incurability.
- Criminal Activity.
- Depression and Social Withdrawal.

Nonsexual Behavioral Indicators Found in All Children

Three (3) types of problems may be found in children of all ages:

1. Problems relating to peers.
2. School difficulties.
3. Sudden noticeable changes in behavior.