

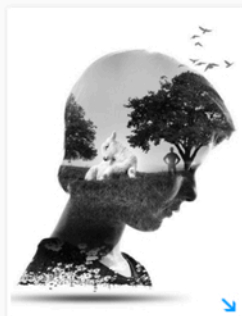


Child abuse: What to look for



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Taking action is imperative if you suspect a child is being abused, but how would you know?

It might be a drawing with troubling imagery, something workers in our local schools or day care centers encounter. Or sexual talk that is out of character for a child of a certain age.

It won't be an outright report of what is being done to them, in most cases. About 90 percent of sexually abused children stay silent about it.

Instead, adults must look for possible warning signs in children, be it nightmares, weight loss, mood swings, a sudden influx of money, depression, inappropriate sex games with other children or a new fear of specific people or places, said Jenny Coleman, program director for Stop It Now.

"It comes down to breaking that cycle of secrecy pretty early," she said. Coleman's agency is based in Massachusetts and aims to curb the sexual abuse of minors. They focus primarily on the role of adults when it comes to preventing child sexual abuse, and the agency's model is built around that concept, using parents, relatives, close family, child abuse survivors, law enforcement or professionals.

Creating a family safety plan is important, Coleman said, and it should focus on several areas including warning signs in adults, teens and children; keeping lines of communication open; setting privacy boundaries in bathrooms and bedrooms; and tactfully approaching others when abuse is suspected.



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"That first response is really crucial," she said.

Here are some things to look for, although be aware that these also can be signs of something completely different, like a divorce, grief over a pet's death, trouble at school or mental health issues like anxiety.

WARNING SIGNS IN CHILDREN:

- Has nightmares or other sleep problems without an explanation
- Seems distracted or distant at odd times
- Has a sudden change in eating habits
- Has trouble swallowing.
- Sudden mood swings: rage, fear, insecurity or withdrawal
- Leaves "clues" that seem likely to provoke a discussion about sexual issues
- Writes, draws, plays or dreams of sexual or frightening images
- Develops new or unusual fear of certain people or places
- Refuses to talk about a secret shared with an adult or older child
- Talks about a new older friend
- Suddenly has money, toys or other gifts without reason
- Thinks of self or body as repulsive, dirty or bad
- Exhibits adult-like sexual behaviors, language and knowledge

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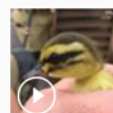
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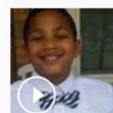
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SIGNS MORE TYPICAL IN YOUNGER KIDS:

- An older child behaving like a younger child (such as bed-wetting or thumb sucking)
- Has new words for private body parts
- Resists removing clothes when appropriate times (bath, bed, toileting, diapering)
- Asks other children to behave sexually or play sexual games
- Mimics adult-like sexual behaviors with toys or stuffed animal

MORE TYPICAL WITH TEENS:

- Self-injury (cutting, burning)
- Inadequate personal hygiene
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Sexual promiscuity
- Running away from home
- Depression, anxiety, suicide attempts
- Compulsive eating or dieting

ASKING QUESTIONS

Any one sign doesn't mean that a child was sexually abused, but the presence of several suggests that you begin asking questions and consider seeking help.

Motivated adults are the key to success, according to two national agencies.

"At the end of the day, preventing child sexual abuse is an adult responsibility," said Lyndon Haviland, CEO at the South Carolina-based Darkness to Light, an agency dedicated to preventing child sexual abuse.

It's that attention and drive to make a difference that can allow the adults in a child's life to provide a tipping point in the fight, experts says.

"It's not enough to empower children to take care of themselves," said Johanna Schuchert, executive director of Prevent Child Abuse Virginia. "We as adults have a key role in the community ... we need to prevent it or keep it from happening again."