

How To Recognize Abuse

What constitutes sexual abuse?

Generally speaking, child sexual abuse involves sexual contact between a child and an older person or forced sexual contact by a peer.

If a child is involved, the following activities are a few examples considered to be sexual abuse:

- Touching of a child's private parts
- A child touching someone else's genitals
- Sexual intercourse
- Obscene phone calls
- Watching sexual activity

It is important to note the legal definitions of sex crimes involving children vary by state. If you have a specific question about the legal definitions, please consult authorities in your state.

The facts

- About one out of every four girls and one out of every seven boys will have a sexual abuse experience by the age of 18.
- Most children are sexually abused by someone they know.
- Young children, even preschoolers, are sexually abused.
- Most adults who sexually abuse children are men, but some women also sexually abuse children.

What to do if you think a child is being abused

If you think a child you know is being abused, you can help in the following ways:

- **Document and report:** It is important to notify your local authorities of the incident as soon as you become aware of it.
- **Listen to the child:** Let the child talk to you about his or her worries and concerns. Don't ask a lot of questions.
- **Believe the child:** Children rarely lie about sexual abuse. Their statements about abuse should be taken seriously.
- **Support the child:** Children may feel sexual abuse is their fault. Let them know they didn't do anything wrong and thank them for telling.
- **Stay calm:** A child may not talk about abuse if he or she knows that it makes you feel angry, worried or scared.
- **Take action:** Children who are being abused must rely on adults to keep them safe. Do not try to forget the problem or hope it will go away. Do not confront.
- **Report your concerns to your local child welfare agency:** A report is simply a request for an investigation. You do not have to know for sure that the abuse happened. By law, any person who knows or has reasonable cause to suspect that a child has been abused **MUST** report such knowledge or suspicion immediately. No one but the child welfare agency will know that you made the report. The toll-free number to call in Tennessee is (877) 237-0004.

The signs

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to detect sexual abuse. Oftentimes children show no outward signs of abuse. In addition, the signs of sexual abuse can vary by the child's age and gender.

Children who are troubled by things that happen to them, including sexual abuse, may show one or more of these signs:

Behavioral indicators

- Child has adult-like knowledge of sex.
- Child behaves in a sexual way, such as rubbing their own private parts more than usual or touching other people's private parts.
- Child begins to show significant changes in eating habits.
- Child acts young or babyish (for example: wetting pants or sucking thumb).
- Child runs away or skips school.
- Child acts differently than usual; a normally outgoing and friendly child becomes shy and quiet.
- Child acts seductively toward classmates, teachers or other adults.
- Child masturbates excessively.
- Child has sleep disturbances (e.g., bedwetting, nightmares).
- Child is fearful of particular places or persons.
- Child appears withdrawn or depressed.
- Child demonstrates over-aggressiveness or acts out.
- Child cries without provocation.
- Child has feelings of low self-worth.

Physical indicators

- Complaints of pain, itching or irritation in genital or rectal area
- Torn, stained or bloody underclothing
- Evidence of trauma (e.g., bruises or bleeding) of the anus, external genitalia or vaginal area
- Child has difficulty walking or sitting
- Presence of a sexually transmitted disease

Family dynamics related to abuse

- There is a history of sexual maltreatment and abusive behavior in the family of origin of the suspected perpetrator.
- The suspected perpetrator acts dominant, protective and/or jealous of the child.
- The suspected perpetrator misuses drugs or alcohol.
- The suspected perpetrator lacks social contacts outside the family.
- The suspected perpetrator turns to the child to get emotional and physical needs met.
- The generational boundaries between parents and child are unclear.