

## Signs of Sexual Abuse

Kids often don't tell anyone about sexual abuse (read *Why Kids Don't Tell* and see an interview on the subject in the Parents & Caregivers section of [cfchildren.org](http://cfchildren.org)), but sometimes they'll display behavioral, physical, and emotional changes. Many of these changes aren't specific to sexual abuse—they can happen with other kinds of trauma or stress, and they can vary by age. But it's important to be alert to these signs, figure out why they're happening, and get your child help.

### Behavioral Signs

These are some behaviors that could mean your child has experienced sexual abuse or another trauma:

- Acting younger or going back to doing younger tasks and activities
- Sudden changes in behavior
- Fear of being alone with a certain person
- Sudden, unexplained fears of certain places or kinds of people (such as all people with a particular feature or characteristic)
- Fear of being touched
- Changes in quality of schoolwork or grades
- Substance abuse
- Delinquency
- Self-mutilation or careless behaviors resulting in self-harm
- Excessive play with their own private body parts
- Persistent sex play with friends, toys, or pets
- Frequent drawings that have sexual content
- Unusual, persistent, or developmentally inappropriate questioning about human sexuality

These changes might not be dramatic, but could include several subtle changes. It's important to know what's natural and healthy in kids' sexual development (for example, many young children are curious about sexuality and frequently play with their private body parts). Knowing these stages of development will help you notice if something doesn't seem right, which might indicate a problem (see the Sexual Development Chart in the Parents & Caregivers section of [cfchildren.org](http://cfchildren.org)).

### Physical Signs

These are some physical signs that could indicate a problem, including the possibility of sexual abuse:

- Eating more or less than usual
- Having trouble sleeping
- Soiling or wetting clothes, or bedwetting (or an increase, if it happens already)
- Stomachaches
- Physical pain or itching in the genital area
- Underwear stained with blood or other discharge
- Rectal bleeding
- Problems walking or sitting

If your child shows any of the physical signs listed above, take him or her to a doctor right away.

### Emotional Signs

These are some emotional signs that could indicate a problem, including the possibility of sexual abuse:

- Severe anxiety (such as nightmares or clinging)
- Depression (such as withdrawal, low self-esteem, thinking about or attempting suicide, or frequent crying)
- Extreme anger (for example, tantrums, aggression, or increased irritability)

Talk to your doctor or the counselor at your child's school if your child shows any of these emotional signs.