

# How to Identify Child Maltreatment

Abuse and neglect rarely occur in one isolated incident. Usually a pattern of abusive or neglectful behavior can be observed over time. A child may not tell anyone that abuse or neglect is occurring. Children may "act out" to express their hurt and anger. Some children display no negative signs. It is important to listen carefully to children who tell you about an act of abuse, even if they say that the abuse happened a long time ago or happened to a friend. If you observe the signs listed below, this does not necessarily mean that a child is being abused. You should, however, pay close attention to the child and see if a pattern of signs emerges.

## Signs of Possible Physical Abuse

- unexplained bruises in various stages of healing (bruises will be different colors)
- self-destructive behavior
- welts, human bite marks, bald spots
- unexplained burns, especially cigarette burns or glove-like burns
- unexplained fractures, abrasions, or other injuries
- nervous, hyperactive, aggressive, disruptive, and destructive behaviors
- unusually wary of physical contact
- unduly frightened of parent or caretaker
- expresses little or no emotion when hurt
- unduly shy, withdrawn, and passive

## Signs of Possible Emotional Abuse

- speech disorders
- delayed physical or emotional development
- ulcers, asthma, severe allergies
- habit disorders, sucking, rocking
- unduly passive and undemanding
- very low self-esteem
- extremely demanding, aggressive, and angry
- antisocial, destructive
- depressed and/or suicidal
- attention seeking
- delinquent behavior, especially in adolescents
- aggressive behaviors toward themselves or others;
- severe anxiety, withdrawal

## Signs of Possible Neglect

- abandonment by parent or caretaker
- unattended medical needs
- consistent lack of supervision
- consistent hunger, inappropriate dress, poor hygiene lice, distended stomach
- poor social skills
- indiscriminate with affection
- pale, listless, begs or steals food, frequently absent from school
- falls asleep in class, regularly displays fatigue
- self-destructive

## Signs of Possible Sexual Abuse

- engages in sexual activity not appropriate for the child's age
- has a detailed and sophisticated understanding of sexual behaviors
- goes back to behaviors such as bed-wetting, speech loss
- suffers sleep disturbances or nightmares
- has pain, itching, bruising, or bleeding in the genitalia
- has venereal disease
- has frequent urinary tract or yeast infections

*The sexually abused older child may:*

- exhibit delinquent or aggressive behavior
- show signs of depression
- display self-injurious behaviors such as substance abuse, self-mutilation, attempts at suicide, prostitution, and running away