

# Signs and Symptoms of Child Abuse

In her book, *How Can I Help?*, Lynda Elliott lists the following signs of child abuse:

## Sexual abuse

- Child is overly affectionate in a sexual way
- Chronic itching, redness, or pain in genitals
- Starting to wet the bed
- Personality changes (withdrawn, clinging, aggressive, angry)
- Sudden loss of appetite or compulsive eating
- Inability to concentrate, bad grades
- Lack of trust or fear of someone they know well
- Nightmares
- Anxiety about clothing being removed
- Drawing sexually explicit pictures

These symptoms may have other root causes, such as bedwetting if the child has had too much to drink before bedtime. But if the child does not regularly wet the bed and then starts for no apparent reason, it may be a sign of sexual abuse.

Parents should be cautious about any adult who monopolizes the child's time, even if it appears to be for good purposes. A pedophile can be very charming and usually ingratiates himself with the child's parents. He may offer to tutor the child, take him to sports or church events, go camping or hunting. He may offer to coach soccer or lead a youth group at church. He may host a sleepover for a group of children at his home.

If a person seems too good to be true, and appears to be more concerned about the child, or more involved in activities than the child's parents, watch out!

Don't be blinded by syrupy concern that may turn out to be the sly manipulation of a child molester.

## Emotional Abuse

- Lagging physical, mental, and emotional development
- Sudden speech disorders
- Self put-downs ("I'm so stupid.")
- Overreacting to mistakes-becoming perfectionistic
- Chronic anxiety
- Repetitive behaviors such as hair twisting, nail biting, rocking

Another sign of emotional abuse is when the child becomes over-protective of a parent or when he becomes the parent's caretaker or confidant.

Some of these symptoms may not become apparent until the child gets older. For example, one young man in his early 20s finally admitted he had been constantly put down by his father for the way he wrote his own name! He was reminded of his father's disapproval every time he signed his name.

## Physical Abuse

- Unexplained injuries or burns
- Improbable explanations for marks or bruises on body
- Wearing clothes to cover injuries, even in hot weather
- Refusing to undress in gym class
- Fear of medical exams
- Fear of physical touch, shrinking back
- Fear of contact with abuser

## What to do if you suspect abuse

- Contact the Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453. You do not have to have solid facts to make a call. Your call will be confidential, and the hotline staff will contact authorities in your area to check out the situation.

- Consult with your pediatrician if you have suspicions about your child being abused. If you suspect a family member, give the doctor an opportunity to talk with the child privately. The child may open up more readily to the doctor, especially if he is trying to protect the abuser.

A child's safety should be a parent's top priority. However, sad to say, many parents put their children at great risk because they don't want to jeopardize a marriage or friendship or lose financial status. No man's friendship is worth more than the safety of a child. No amount of money will compensate for a child's well being.

Social service agencies will not hesitate to remove a child from an abusive home if the non-abusive parent refuses to leave the abuser.

Every one of us have the duty and privilege to protect children who are being abused. It is a false assumption that children are so resilient they will get over the effects of abuse. The trauma is carried into relationships which form dysfunctional families unless the pain is dealt with. In some cases, the adult child resists a relationship with God or has a distorted view of God because of a bad experience with a demeaning, condemning father.

The emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual health of a child should be guarded at all costs! It may be out of your control to protect a child from suffering any abuse in their lifetime, but you do have the power to speak up and take action against evil when you see it.

You have ears to hear and arms to hold a hurting child. Listen carefully, without judgment, and be ready with a hug of encouragement. Affirmation from people who care goes a long way to dispel discouraging voices and put-downs from the past.

Children are treasures from the Lord to be protected at all costs. That responsibility belongs to all of us—not just their parents!