

IF YOU SUSPECT YOUR CHILD HAS BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED

Report the abuse to the authorities immediately. If the abuse was by a member of your household or an immediate family member, call the New York State Child Abuse Reporting Hotline at 1-800-342-3720.

If the abuse was by someone outside of your family, report to the local or state police or sheriff's department.

Help your child work with the professionals handling the case. You may need to be a strong advocate for your child, reassuring him or her during questioning. You can request that a specialist trained in child sexual abuse and interviewing children question your child.

If you haven't already done so, get a medical exam at once for your child, even if he or she appears to be unhurt. You need this to protect your child's health, as well as for possible evidence.

Your pediatrician may be able to refer you to a counselor who specializes in child sexual abuse. If there is a Child Advocacy Center in your area, you can contact them for medical needs and information about reporting to authorities. Your local rape crisis program may be able to provide consultation, counseling, and referrals.

This will probably feel like the worst thing that ever happened to your family. Find support for yourself. Find someone you trust to talk to. Take care of your feelings, for your child's sake as well as your own.

Try to keep as calm a home environment as possible. Protect your child, but do not make him or her feel isolated or different. Take life one day at a time. You don't have to solve everything in a day.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

You can find help for your child and support for yourself, as well as information about Child Advocacy Centers and other sexual abuse treatment programs by calling:

PREVENT CHILD ABUSE NEW YORK'S PARENT HELPLINE

1-800-CHILDREN (244-5373)



Prevent Child Abuse New York
33 Elk Street, 2nd Floor | Albany, NY 12207
518-445-1273 | 1-800-CHILDREN
518-436-5889 fax
www.preventchildabuseny.org

How Can I Tell?



A PARENT'S GUIDE TO RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS OF SEXUAL ABUSE



WHAT KIND OF PROBLEM IS THIS?

Sexual abuse of children is a widespread and tragic problem that affects children of all ages and from all walks of life. It is rare for children to be abused by strangers. More often, children are abused by someone they know and trust: a relative, friend, neighbor, coach, baby-sitter, parent, etc. Sexual abuse is not always a violent act. The child is involved in “games” or seduction over a period of time.

It is also a secret problem—children often do not tell anyone. They may not say anything because they are embarrassed or afraid to tell their parents. Children often think—and sometimes are told—that what is happening is their fault. The abuser might threaten to harm family members if the child tells. Young children may not even realize there is something to tell; they are taught to respect and obey adults.

THEN HOW CAN I KNOW?

It is hard for most parents to even think about the possibility of their children being sexually abused, but parents who familiarize themselves with the signs of sexual abuse are more likely to recognize problem situations. While there may be causes other than sexual abuse for many of these signs, they should arouse concern and warrant further attention.



SIGNS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

PHYSICAL SIGNS:

- Irritated or itching genitals or anus
- Pain or injury to the areas of the genitals or mouth
- Recurrent urinary-tract infections or difficulty with urination
- Cuts and bruises
- Vaginal or penile discharge
- Pregnancy
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Unusual and offensive odors

If your child exhibits any of these symptoms, he or she should be medically treated immediately.

CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR:

Often there are no physical signs of sexual abuse. Behavior changes are more common. For example:

- Fear of a person or certain places, such as showers or bathrooms
- Clinging, anxious, or irritable behavior
- Reverting to more childish behavior, such as thumb sucking
- Sudden self-consciousness about genitals
- Sudden interest in genitals, sexual acts, and sexual words
- Sexual behavior that is inappropriate for the child's age
- Acting out sexual or abusive behavior with toys, animals, or people
- Nightmares, bed-wetting, fear of the dark, difficulty falling asleep, or other new fears.
- Increase or decrease in appetite
- Vehement over-reaction when the child is questioned about being touched
- Drawings that depict frightening or abusive scenes
- Sexual contact with other children that is forced, coerced or chronic
- Chronic masturbation around others or in public
- Sudden loss of interest in activities
- Self-injury, promiscuity, or running away

TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN

WHAT IF I'M JUST NOT SURE?

The most reliable and most common indicator of sexual abuse is a child's disclosure. You may need to open the door of communication before your child will tell you. Sometimes children talk in roundabout ways, and you have to listen carefully for clues. For example, “I don't like to be alone with Mrs. Smith,” or “Mr. Jones acts funny with me.”

Be careful not to plant ideas in the child's mind or to suggest what you expect to hear. You will get further—and get a more accurate account—if you ask open-ended questions. For example, “Something is bothering you. Can you tell me about it?” “I'd like to know more about this.” Be very patient and take plenty of time. Don't push and prod.

Stay as calm as possible. Children often stop talking if they think what they are saying makes you upset.

WHAT IF MY CHILD DOES TELL ME ABOUT BEING SEXUALLY ABUSED?

Believe your child. Accept what your child tells you. Don't deny or ignore it. If in doubt, err on the child's side. Children rarely lie about being sexually abused.

Allow your child to talk, but don't press. If you insist that your child repeat the details again and again, he or she may become reluctant to talk. Remember that your child will also have to explain what happened to the authorities as well.

Protect your child immediately from the suspected offender. You can start repairing the damage at once by assuring your child that the abuse will not continue. Assure your child that it is not his or her fault, that you are glad he or she told, and that there are many people who will help your family.