

Sexual abuse impacts across age and developmental stages

Sexual abuse occurs throughout childhood. Be aware of common signs and symptoms of sexual abuse. Most boys and girls will remain silent. Any one sign or symptom does not mean that a child has been abused, but the presence of several signs may suggest that a child is at risk. It is important to believe reports of sexual abuse no matter what you observe about the child.

Boys and girls react differently to sexual abuse based on several factors, including age and developmental stage. The majority of signs and symptoms are behavioral and emotional, but physical changes can indicate abuse. The most common physical signs of sexual abuse are:

- Pain, discoloration, sores, cuts, bleeding or discharges in genitals, anus or mouth;
- Persistent or recurring pain during urination and/or bowel movements;
- Wetting and soiling accidents unrelated to bathroom training;
- Weight loss or weight gain;
- Lack of personal care.

Infants and toddlers (ages 0–5)

It is common for young children (ages 0–5) to show regressive behaviors. Children may lose certain skills or behaviors they mastered (for example, bladder control), or may revert to behaviors they had previously outgrown (thumb-sucking). Young children often become clingy to familiar adults, including caregivers to whom they feel close. They may resist leaving places where they feel safe, or be afraid to go places that may trigger memories of a frightening experience. Significant changes in eating and/or sleeping habits are common and young children may complain of physical aches and pains that have no medical basis.

Common signs and symptoms of sexual abuse for infants and toddlers (ages 0-5)

- Crying, whimpering, screaming more than usual.
- Clinging or unusually attaching themselves to caregivers.
- Refusing to leave “safe” places.
- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping constantly.
- Losing the ability to converse, losing bladder control, and other developmental regression.
- Displaying knowledge or interest in sexual acts inappropriate to their age.

Younger children (ages 6–9)

Younger children may also exhibit regressive behaviors, such as asking adults to feed or dress them, or may report unexplained physical symptoms. Older children have a better understanding of the meaning of sexual abuse and they have more advanced thoughts and beliefs about what they experience and perceived negative consequences. This results in the development of emotional reactions ranging from sadness, fear, anxiety and anger, to feelings of shame and guilt. Older children may begin to withdraw from friends and refuse to go to school, or they may begin to behave aggressively. They may also be unable to concentrate, resulting in a decline in school performance.

Common signs and symptoms of sexual abuse for younger children ages 6-9

- Similar reactions to children ages 0-5.
- Fear of particular people, places or activities, or of being attacked.
- Behaving like a baby (wetting the bed or wanting parents to dress them).

- Suddenly refusing to go to school.
- Touching their private parts a lot.
- Avoiding family and friends or generally keeping to themselves.
- Refusing to eat or wanting to eat all the time.

Adolescents (ages 10–19)

Adolescence is defined as the period between ages 10 and 19 years old. It is a continuum of physical, cognitive, behavioral and psychosocial development. Adolescents face particular challenges that are specific to their developmental stage.

Early adolescence (ages 10–14) is marked by puberty and important physical changes. Although they may be emotionally and cognitively closer to children than adults, adolescents in this age group are just beginning to define their identities. As early adolescents begin to become aware of their sexuality, they may begin to experiment with sex or be targeted for sex. Adolescents in this age group, especially girls, tend to be dependent on others, lack power within most of their relationships and are not given an opportunity to participate in decisions that affect them.

Late adolescence (ages 15–19) is when puberty has ended but the body is still developing. Adolescents in this age group tend to act more like adults, but have yet to reach cognitive, behavioral or emotional maturity. Their capacity for analytical thought and reflection is enhanced but is also still developing. Peers are extremely important and influential during this time period. This is extremely important in relation to girls who have limited exposure to their peers and others outside their immediate families. Girls who have reached physical maturity have an increased chance of being targeted for sexual violence and exploitation.

In general, adolescents tend to place more importance on peer groups and “fitting in.” This can complicate their efforts to come to terms with sexual abuse, given the high level of stigma and shame that sexual abuse carries. Adolescents may be reluctant to discuss their feelings or may even deny any emotional reactions to the sexual abuse, in part because of their desire to fit in and avoid the shame and stigma associated with sexual abuse. Adolescents, especially older adolescents, are more likely to show traumatic responses similar to those seen in adults.

Common signs and symptoms of sexual abuse for adolescents ages 10-19

- Depression (chronic sadness), crying or emotional numbness.
- Nightmares (bad dreams) or sleep disorders.
- Problems in school or avoidance of school, changes in school performance
- Displaying anger or expressing difficulties with peer relationships, changes in or abandonment of friendships, fighting with people, disobeying or disrespecting authority,
- Avoidance, withdrawal from family and friends, avoidance of reminders of trauma
- Emotional numbing
- Self-destructive behavior (drugs, alcohol, self-inflicted injuries, acts of self-harm).
- Exhibiting eating problems, such as eating all the time or not wanting to eat.
- Suicidal thoughts or tendencies, acts of self-harm
- Talking about abuse, experiencing flashbacks of abuse.

Reference: UNICEF IRC (2012) Caring for child survivors of sexual abuse, Sexual Abuse impacts across age and developmental stages, pg 31-36