

Physical and Behavioural Signs of Abuse

Concerns about a child may come to the attention of staff/volunteers in a number of ways:

- Through observation of the child. A child's behaviour may indicate that it is likely that he/she is being abused.
- The child may disclose abuse.
- Information may be given by parents, other people or agencies.
- A child may show some signs of physical injury of which there seems to be no satisfactory explanation.
- Something in the behaviour of one of the workers or young person, or in the way the worker or young person relates to a child, alerts them or makes them feel uncomfortable in some way.
- Observing one child abuse another

There are 4 types of abuse, the main signs of each type are listed below

1. The signs of physical abuse may include:

- Unexplained bruising, marks or injuries on any part of the body
- Bruising which reflects hand marks or fingers (from slapping or pinching)
- Cigarette burns
- Bite marks
- Broken bones
- Scolds

Changes in behaviour which can also indicate physical abuse:

- Fear of parents being approached for an explanation
- Aggressive behaviour or severe temper outbursts
- Flinching when approached or touched
- Reluctance to get changed, for example wearing long sleeves in hot weather
- Depression
- Withdrawn behaviour
- Running away from home

2. The physical signs of emotional abuse may include:

- A failure to thrive or grow, particularly if the child puts on weight in other circumstances, e.g. hospital or away from parents' care.
- Sudden speech disorders
- Development delay, either in terms of physical or emotional progress

Changes in behaviour which can also indicate emotional abuse include:

- Neurotic behaviour, e.g. hair twisting, rocking

- Being unable to play
- Fear of making mistakes
- Self harm
- Fear of parents being approached about their behaviour

3. The physical signs of sexual abuse may include:

- Pain or itching in the genital/anal areas
- Bruising or bleeding near genital/anal areas
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Vaginal discharge or infection
- Stomach pains
- Discomfort when walking or sitting down

Changes in behaviour which can also indicate sexual abuse include:

- Sudden or unexplained changes in behaviour, eg becoming aggressive or withdrawn
- Fear of being left with a specific person or group of people
- Having nightmares
- Running away from home
- Sexual knowledge which is beyond their age or development level
- Sexual drawings or language
- Bedwetting
- Eating problems such as overeating or anorexia
- Self-harm or mutilation, sometimes leading to suicide attempts
- Saying they have secrets that they can't tell anyone about
- Substance or drug abuse
- Suddenly having unexplained sources of money
- Not allowed to have friends (particularly in adolescence)
- Acting in a sexually explicit way towards adults

4. The physical signs of neglect may be:

- Constant hunger, sometimes stealing food from other children
- Constantly dirty or 'smelly'
- Loss of weight, or being constantly underweight
- Inappropriate dress for the conditions

Changes in behaviour which can also indicate neglect may include:

- Complaining of being tired all the time
- Not requesting medical assistance and/or failing to attend appointments
- Having few friends
- Mentioning their being left alone or unsupervised