



“Recognising indications of potential abuse is complex and there is no simple checklist to allow easy recognition.”¹

There are potential warning signs that [you] can be alert to but they should be observed and assessed with care.”²

“It should not be automatically assumed that abuse is occurring, and talking to the child may reveal something quite innocent. In addition these indicators should also be considered in the local context and judgments made about their relevance. It is important, however, not to dismiss significant changes in behaviour, fears, worries, and physical indicators a child is exhibiting. [...] Do not ignore these signs, but remember it is not your role to become an investigator.”³

From Kidscape

- Possible signs of physical abuse
- Unexplained recurrent injuries or burns
- Improbable excuses or refusal to explain injuries
- Wearing clothes to cover injuries, even in hot weather
- Refusal to undress for gym
- Bald patches
- Chronic running away
- Fear of medical help or examination
- Self-destructive tendencies
- Aggression towards others
- Fear of physical contact – shrinking back if touched
- Admitting that they are punished, but the punishment is excessive (such as a child being beaten every night to “make him study”)
- Fear of suspected abuser being contacted

Possible signs of emotional abuse

- Physical, mental and emotional development lags
- Sudden speech disorders
- Continual self-depreciation (“I’m stupid, ugly, worthless, etc”)
- Overreaction to mistakes
- Extreme fear of any new situation
- Inappropriate response to pain (“I deserve this”)
- Neurotic behaviour (rocking, hair twisting, self-mutilation)
- Extremes of passivity or aggression

Possible signs of neglect

- Constant hunger
- Poor personal hygiene
- Constant tiredness
- Poor state of clothing
- Emaciation
- Untreated medical problems
- No social relationships
- Compulsive scavenging
- Destructive tendencies

Possible signs of sexual abuse:

- Being overly affectionate or knowledgeable in a sexual way inappropriate to the child’s age
- Medical problems such as chronic itching, pain in the genitals, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), pregnancy
- Other extreme reactions, such as depression, self-mutilation, suicide attempts, running away, overdoses, anorexia
- Personality changes such as becoming insecure or clinging
- Regressing to younger behaviour patterns such as thumb sucking or bringing out discarded cuddly toys
- Sudden loss of appetite or compulsive eating
- Being isolated or withdrawn
- Inability to concentrate
- Lack of trust or fear of someone they know well, such as not wanting to be alone with a babysitter or child minder
- Starting to wet again, day or night/nightmares
- Become worried about clothing being removed
- Suddenly drawing sexually explicit pictures
- Trying to be “ultra-good” or perfect; overreacting to criticism

A child may be subjected to a combination of different kinds of abuse. It is also possible that a child may show no outward signs and hide what is happening from everyone.

¹ Sense International Child Protection Policy, section 5.2.1.

² Sense International Child Protection Policy, section 5.2.2.

³ ECPAT Australia, Choose with Care, p.34.