

Signs of Neglected or Abused Children



Whether working in education, childcare, or any position with the public, we all owe it to children to watch for their safety. This could include things like stopping them from running into the road or swimming without supervision. Here, we are going to cover the signs of abuse or neglect. Know the signs so you can report potential abuse to law enforcement.

When reviewing this list, remember that context is important. When looking at warning signs for behaviors that might indicate a larger problem like sexual assault, neglect, or even suicidal thoughts, we need to understand that any single sign or behavior needs to be understood within the larger context of social, emotional, and physical behaviors. For example, while difficulty sitting or walking may be a sign of genital trauma, it may also be an injury from sports or another accident. While baggy clothing may indicate shame regarding their body, it may also be related to poverty, culture, cleanliness standards, or style choices.

Signs of Emotional Abuse

- Excessively withdrawn, fearful, or anxious about doing something wrong.
- Extremes of behavior – Extremely compliant or extremely demanding. Extremely passive or extremely aggressive.
- Strained or difficult attachment to parent or caregiver.
- Behaves very adult-like (taking care of other children) or regresses to previous infant-like behaviors (rocking, thumb sucking, throwing tantrums).

Signs of Physical Abuse

- Frequent injuries or unexplained bruises, welts, or cuts.
- Always watchful and “on alert,” as if waiting for something bad to happen.
- Injuries that leave a specific pattern or mark, such as from a hand or belt.
- Avoids touch, flinches at sudden movements, or seems afraid to go home.
- Wears inappropriate clothing for the weather, such as long sleeves on a hot day.

Signs of Neglect

- Clothing is ill-fitting, extremely dirty, or inappropriate for the weather.
- Hygiene is consistently poor, unbathed, hair unwashed and matted, and a noticeable body odor.
- Untreated illness or physical injuries.
- Frequently unsupervised, left alone, or allowed to play in unsafe situations or environments.
- Frequently late or absent from school.

Signs of Sexual Abuse

- Trouble sitting or walking.
- Displays knowledge or interest in sexual acts inappropriate for their age or even seductive behavior.
- Makes strong efforts to avoid a specific person without an obvious reason.
- Doesn’t want to change clothes in front of others or participate in physical activities.
- Contracting a sexually transmitted disease or getting pregnant, especially under the age of 14.
- Runs away from home.

If you suspect child abuse, report it to Law Enforcement or Child Protective Services right away. The California Department of Education’s [Child Abuse Identification & Reporting Guidelines](#) provide more information.