

Sexual abuse in children or teens with disabilities



What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse includes such things as:

- Oral (mouth), anal (rectum) or genital (private area) contact.
- The use of objects for vaginal or anal penetration.
- Making a child available to others as a child prostitute.
- Exposing a child to sexual contact, activity or behavior, including pornography.

Boys and girls are abused most often by adults or older children who know them and who have power over them. The abuser is often a person whom the child trusts.

Sexual abuse can happen only one time, or it can happen often. Either way, it places children and teens at great risk for physical and emotional harm.

Why do I need to know this?

- Children who cannot talk or have decreased cognition (mental ability) may be at higher risk for sexual abuse.
- Children may not know what is wrong and may not be able to say “no”.
- Children may not be able to handle threats by the abuser.
- Children with traumatic brain injury (TBI) may seek intimacy or sex without knowing the possible consequences, such as pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).
- Children with a poor self-image related to disability may be prone to sexual abuse.

What are some possible signs of sexual abuse?

Your child may have some of the following signs. **All of these signs may not be present. Some children may show no signs of abuse at all.**

Type of sign	Examples
Physical signs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pain, bruises or trauma in private areas• Sexually transmitted disease or infection (STD or STI)• Pregnancy
Physical complaints	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stomach aches• Headaches• Trouble sleeping• Appetite changes (may eat more or less than normal)
Behavior changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Depression• Anxiety

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.

Sexual abuse in children or teens with disabilities, continued

Type of sign	Examples
Behavior changes (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Panic attacks• Sudden, unexplained fear of a certain person, place or thing• Avoiding certain people or places• Changes in habits or mood• Withdrawal or not taking part in normal or routine activities• Regression (going back to younger behaviors, such as thumb sucking, clinging to parents, wetting the bed, fear of darkness, sleep problems or temper tantrums)• Low self-esteem• Shame• Guilt• Inappropriate sexual behavior• Self-destructive or risk-taking behavior

What can I do to protect my child?

Children and teens need adults to help keep them safe. You can do many things to help prevent sexual abuse. Some of these include:

- Know that sexual abuse can happen.
- Know those people who spend time with your child. Ask childcare workers and other caregivers for references.
- Make sure your child knows “safe” and “unsafe” behaviors. Encourage them to talk with you about these as much as they are able.
- Monitor your children and teens with social media, phones and the internet.

Call your child’s doctor **right away** if you notice any of the signs listed in the table above. They may be caused by something else, but it is still important to check.

Where can I learn more?

For more details, visit the Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta Stephanie V. Blank Center for Safe and Healthy Children page at choa.org/medical-services/child-protection-advocacy-center.

This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child’s doctor or a member of your child’s healthcare team about specific care of your child.

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