

## Protecting God's Children for Adults



### Warning Signs in Children: Cries for Help

It is clear that our ability to pay attention to children helps us to build bonds of trust and encourages their normal development. Actively listening to children leaves them with a greater sense that we care about them and that our caring makes them safer.

Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that we can prevent all incidents of harm to children. When a child has been victimized they can be afraid to tell anyone, including their parent, about the offense. They may not tell us verbally, but they *do* communicate their pain. It is crucial that we pay attention to children's signals so that we are able to detect the sometimes subtle changes that can occur after a child has been a victim of sexual abuse. We must be familiar with their normal moods, habits, and their general ways of being. It is then that we are able to recognize behavioral changes that may indicate a significant problem.

An abused child will communicate in ways that almost shout, "Please notice me, see what has happened to me." It is the responsibility of all caring adults to take action to ensure a child's safety and wellbeing.



Many sex offenders act against victims in stages. In essence, they often attempt to gradually build from minor boundary violations to full blown sexual assaults. The hopeful news is that there is often an opportunity to intervene before the offense becomes most severe. In the sad case where the offense has already become severe, we must intervene so that it is stopped and the child is helped.

When we think of "warning signs," we must keep in mind that we are never certain abuse has occurred until the child confides in us or until a medical, forensic, or psychological examination gives evidence that abuse has occurred.

Every child is an individual and a particular behavior in one might signal a problem, while in another child it could be only a sign of some developmental struggle. This reinforces the importance of maintaining an open and trusting relationship with your child. If we notice a problem, then our relationship with the child and the degree to which he or she trusts us will go a long way in determining how much this child confides and how soon that child gets help and is made safe again.

Let us look at some behaviors that may be warning signs that some form of sexual abuse has occurred or is occurring:

1. Signs of anxiety or excessive nervousness
2. Signs that child has fear of particular adult or older child
3. Depressed mood
4. Self-harming behaviors, including cutting one's self
5. Withdrawing from family or friends, isolative behaviors
6. Change in sleep patterns or bedwetting where there was no problem with such in the recent past
7. Expressions of pains or illnesses where there is no medical cause
8. Increased nightmares
9. Increased aggression

10. Drug use
11. Indications of pain in genital or anal areas
12. Increase sexualized behaviors, talk, or knowledge that are not age appropriate
13. Attempts to sexualize relationships with adults or other children
14. Onset of academic difficulties in school
15. Sudden change in dress, ranging from attempts to cover self to wearing sexualized outfits
16. Fear of going home from school or other activities
17. Touching of own genitals excessively and/or publicly

Remember that any of the signs listed or any combination of these behaviors could be warning signs of sexual abuse. It is important to note that if these signs are present, a professional should be contacted for assistance. A child could be in danger from sexual abuse or other forms of abuse, or he or she could be going through some difficult developmental issues. Take appropriate steps to immediately intervene and contact the professionals in your community to speak with the child so that whatever has led to problematic behaviors can be addressed.