

Potential Signs & Risk Factors of Child Sexual Abuse

VERSION 6: March 2025

Signs of sexual abuse may vary depending on the child or young person's developmental stage and the nature of the abuse.

Whilst children and young people of all cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds and ages are at risk of being sexually abused, researchers have found a number of factors that can put children at higher risk.

It is important to note that just because a child or young person is displaying signs of sexual abuse, it does not confirm that sexual abuse has occurred. Similarly, just because a child is at higher risk of sexual abuse, it does not mean that child will be or has been sexually abused.

POTENTIAL SIGNS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

- The child is quieter or more distant than usual;
- The child is clingier than usual;
- Unusual or new fears, sometimes around touch, being alone, being with a particular person or in a particular place;
- Difficulty concentrating or with memory, zoning out, seeming distracted or not listening;
- Eating, sleeping or hygiene changes;
- Regressive behaviours such as bed-wetting or soiling after being toilet trained, acting or wanting to be treated like a baby/younger child again;
- Showing knowledge of sexual behaviour beyond their developmental age;
- Sexual themes in artwork, stories, play etc.;
- 'Acting out' behaviours (aggression, destructive behaviours, truanting behaviour);
- 'Acting in' behaviours (withdrawal from friends and family, depression);
- Problems with friends and schoolwork/attendance;
- Vague symptoms of illness such as headache or tummy ache;
- Self-harm (cutting, risky behaviour);
- Asking vague questions or making vague statements about topics such as secrets, unusual 'games', or adult behaviours.

Above all else, it is important to pay attention to behavioural changes in your children and take them seriously if they disclose any type of abuse.

POTENTIAL RISK FACTORS

Research shows the following factors can place children and young people at higher risk of experiencing sexual abuse.

It is important to understand that the presence of one or more of these risk factors does not mean that a child has been or will be sexually abused. Conversely, it is extremely important to understand that an absence of risk factors does not mean that a child has not or will never be sexually abused. ALL CHILDREN are at risk of sexual abuse.

GENDER

Girls are around twice as likely to be sexually abused than boys (37% vs. 19%).¹

AGE

The average age at which child sexual abuse first occurs is 8.²

DISABILITY

Children with a disability are at increased risk, particularly those with high dependency needs and those with communication difficulties.³

FAMILY

The absence of one or both parents, parental impairments (e.g., illness or substance abuse), and a family's social isolation may increase the risk of child sexual abuse.³

CARE

Children in residential care have an increased risk of child sexual abuse⁴ and those with a mild intellectual disability in out-of-home care are at even greater risk.⁵



**DOWNLOAD OUR FREE
GUIDE FOR PARENTS &
CARERS - PROTECTING
CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE
FROM SEXUAL ABUSE**

1. Mathews, B., Pacella, R.E., Scott, J.G., Finkelhor, D., Meinck, F., Higgins, D.J., Erskine, H.E., Thomas, H.J., Lawrence, D., Haslam, D.M., Malacova, E., Dunne, M.P. (2023). The prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from a national survey. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 218 (6 Suppl.), S13-S18. doi: 10.5694/mja2.51873. 2. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016). *Personal Safety, Australia*. Canberra, ABS. 3. Quadara, A., Nagy, V., Higgins, D. & Siegel, N. (2015). Conceptualising the prevention of child sexual abuse: Final report (Research Report No. 33). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. 4. Euser S., Alink L.R.A., Tharner A., Van IJzendoorn M.H. & Bakermans-Kranenburg M.J. (2015). The prevalence of child sexual abuse in out-of-home care: Increased risk for children with a mild intellectual disability. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 29, 83-92.5. Euser S., Alink L.R.A., Tharner A., Van IJzendoorn M.H. & Bakermans-Kranenburg M.J. (2013). The prevalence of child sexual abuse in out-of-home care: a comparison between abuse in residential and in foster care. *Child Maltreatment*, 18, 221-231.