

Signs and Symptoms of Sexual Abuse in a Toddler

Very young children are at a disadvantage for abuse due to their lack of language skills and the real possibility that they have been told or threatened about not telling. Because of their young age, toddlers are not able to escape from their environment. Parents know their children best and need to trust their inner voice when red flags appear. Failure to respond to a child's distress signal sets the child on a damaging developmental and emotional course.

Possible signs of abuse in young children:

- Any outcry from the child such as "Grandpa hurt my bottom"
- Sleep disturbances
- A change in toileting behaviors (bedwetting, holding bowel movements, or fear of toileting)
- "Clingy" or insecure behavior where formerly independent and confident
- Dislike or resistance of social situations where specific friends or family are present
- Raw or red friction marks on inner thighs, buttocks, or genitalia.

The greatest predictor of sexual abuse in toddlers is behavior:

- Overly aggressive or overly withdrawn behavior which is out of sync with the usual behavior
- Intense, anxious, or precocious interest in genitalia of self or others
- Masturbatory behaviors when excited or anxious, despite the social circumstances
- Grabbing of others' private parts or breasts

The highest predictor of toddler sexual abuse appears to be sexualized behaviors. Clusters of behaviors rather than isolated behaviors may be more indicative. It is also possible in very rare instances for a very young child to show discrete symptoms.

This list is for informational purposes and not meant as a diagnostic tool. It is not encompassing and should be considered in a larger context of other circumstances and behaviors across time. If abuse is *suspected*, a call must be made to the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services 1-800-252-5400. Professional consultation should be sought for support of the child and her family, such as the family pediatrician or a psychologist, social worker, or counselor who specializes in young children and abuse and trauma.

Source:

Hewitt, S. (1999). *Assessing allegations of sexual abuse in preschool children: Understanding small voices*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.