

Indicators of Child Abuse

The list of behavioural indicators provided is **only indicative**, and **not exhaustive**. These signs should never be used in isolation to make assumptions about someone's behaviour. Instead, they should be considered as part of a broader context, and any concerns should be addressed through proper child protection procedures.

Indicators of Emotional Abuse

Physical indicators that a child is being emotionally abused	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Delayed physical development - Noticeable delay in growth or weight gain/loss not attributed to medical conditions• Frequent psychosomatic complaints - Headaches, stomach aches, or nausea without a clear medical cause• Sleep disturbances - insomnia, nightmares, or excessive fatigue• Appetite changes - Sudden loss of appetite or overeating.• Poor hygiene - Consistently dirty, unkempt appearance.• Regression in developmental milestones - Bedwetting, bed soiling, thumb-sucking,
Behavioural indicators that child or young person is being emotionally abused	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Excessive withdrawal or fearfulness - Appears anxious, timid, or overly compliant, avoids eye contact or physical closeness• Extreme behaviours - Displays aggression, defiance, or hostility, exhibits overly passive or clingy behaviour• Developmental delays - Struggles with language, social, or emotional development, appears behind peers in cognitive or emotional maturity• Difficulty forming relationships - Has trouble making or keeping friends, shows distrust of adults or authority figures• Self-harm or suicidal thoughts - Engages in risky behaviours or talks about self-harm.• Overly responsible or parent-like behaviour - Takes on adult roles or responsibilities, appears overly concerned with pleasing others• Frequent absences or reluctance to go home – Regular non-attendance, expresses fear or anxiety about returning home
Indicators in adult behaviour that could indicate emotional abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Constant Criticism or Belittling - Regularly insults, mocks, or undermines the child's self-worth, uses sarcasm or harsh language to shame or control• Excessive Control or Domination - Dictates every aspect of the child's life without allowing autonomy, discourages independent thinking or decision-making.

- **Emotional Manipulation** - Uses guilt, fear, or love withdrawal to control the child, blames the child for adult problems or emotions
- **Unrealistic Expectations** - Expects the child to meet adult standards or responsibilities
- **Inappropriate Role Assignments** - Treats the child as a confidant or partner in adult matters, relies on the child for emotional support or caregiving
- **Isolation and Rejection** - Prevents the child from forming friendships or socialising.
- **Threatening or Intimidating Behaviour** - Uses threats of harm, abandonment, or punishment to control, forces the child to witness abuse of others
- **Lack of Empathy or Responsiveness** - Ignores the child's emotional needs or distress, fails to comfort or support the child in times of need

Indicators of Neglect

Physical indicators that a child or young person is being neglected.

- **Poor hygiene** - Consistently dirty or unwashed appearance, strong body odour or untreated head lice
- **Inappropriate clothing** - Clothing that is unsuitable for the weather (e.g., no coat in winter), ill-fitting, torn, or excessively worn clothing
- **Unmet medical or dental needs** - Untreated injuries or illnesses, obvious dental decay or infections
- **Malnutrition or hunger** - Noticeable weight loss or failure to thrive, constant hunger.
- **Persistent Skin Disorders** – Nappy rash, skin infections.
- **Fatigue or listlessness** - Appears constantly tired or lacking energy, falls asleep frequently or struggles to stay awake
- **Developmental delays** – Not meeting physical, emotional, or cognitive milestones, difficulty with motor skills or speech
- **Frequent accidents or injuries** - Repeated minor injuries that may suggest lack of supervision, unexplained bruises or marks

Behavioural indicators that child or young person is being neglected

- **Frequent Absences or Tardiness** - Regularly non-attendance or arriving late without explanation.
- **Persistent Hunger or Stealing Food** - Eats excessively when food is available
- **Is very demanding of affection or attention**
- **Overly Adult or Caregiver Behaviour** - Takes on responsibilities beyond their age (e.g., caring for siblings), appears overly independent or self-reliant
- **Delayed Development** - Struggles with speech, motor skills, or emotional regulation, appears behind peers in learning or behaviour

**Indicators in adult behaviour
that could indicate neglect**

- **Low Self-Esteem or Apathy** - Shows little interest in activities or achievements, appears indifferent to praise or criticism
- **Frequent Illnesses or Injuries** - Often sick or injured without receiving proper care, may not have access to basic health services
- **Failure to Provide Basic Needs** - Does not ensure the child has adequate food, clothing, shelter, or hygiene, ignores the child's medical or dental needs
- **Lack of Supervision** - Leaves the child alone or in unsafe situations for extended periods.
- **Disengagement or Indifference** - Shows little interest in the child's emotional well-being or development, rarely interacts or communicates with the child
- **Inconsistent or Erratic Parenting** - Frequently changes caregivers or living arrangements.
- **Failure to Support Education** - Does not ensure the child attends regularly, shows little concern for academic progress or education engagement.
- **Exposure to Harmful Environments** - Allows the child to witness domestic violence, criminal activity, or substance abuse, fails to protect the child from dangerous people or situations
- **Involving the Child in Adult Responsibilities** - Relies on the child to care for siblings or manage household tasks.

Indicators of Physical Abuse

**Physical indicators that a child
or young person is being
physically abused.**

- **Unexplained Injuries** - Bruises, burns, fractures, or cuts in various stages of healing, injuries with clear patterns (e.g., belt marks, handprints)
- **Frequent or Recurrent Injuries** - Regular appearance of injuries without a reasonable explanation, caregiver explanations may be inconsistent or implausible
- **Developmental Delays** - Hearing, vision and language delays.
- **Fear of Physical Contact** - Flinching or recoiling when approached, reluctance to be touched or examined
- **Wearing Concealing Clothing** - Long sleeves or pants worn even in warm weather, possibly to hide injuries
- **Delayed or Inadequate Medical Attention** - Injuries left untreated or medical care not sought in a timely manner
- **Signs of restraint** - Marks on wrists, ankles, or other areas suggesting the use of restraints

Behavioural indicators that child or young person is being physically abused.

- **Fearful or Anxious Behaviour** - Appears afraid of going home or being around certain adults, flinches or cowers when approached suddenly
- **Aggression or Withdrawal** - Displays aggressive behaviour toward peers, adults or animals, may be unusually quiet, withdrawn, or overly compliant
- **Reluctance to Change Clothes or Participate in Physical Activities** - Avoids activities that require changing clothes, may try to hide parts of the body
- **Regression in Development** - Reverts to earlier behaviours such as bedwetting or thumb-sucking, shows signs of emotional distress or developmental delays
- **Hypervigilance** - Constantly alert or on edge, as if anticipating danger, difficulty relaxing or concentrating
- **Disclosures or Hints of Abuse** - May talk about being hurt or punished harshly, makes indirect comments that suggest fear or pain
- **Avoidance of Physical Contact** - Resists hugs or physical closeness.
- **Sudden Changes in Behaviour**
- **Inconsistent or Implausible Explanations for Injuries** - Provides vague, changing, or unlikely reasons for their injuries

Indicators in adult behaviour that could indicate physical abuse.

- **Aggressive or Controlling Behaviour** - Displays anger or hostility toward the child in public
- **Inconsistent or Implausible Explanations for Injuries** - Provides vague, changing, or unlikely reasons for the child's injuries, avoids discussing the child's physical condition, may blame the injury on another person.
- **Reluctance to Seek Medical Help for the Child** - Delays or avoids taking the child to a doctor or hospital, may refuse consent for medical treatment
- **Minimizing or Denying Harmful Behaviour** - Dismisses concerns raised by others about the child's wellbeing, claims injuries are accidental or blames the child

Indicators of Sexual Abuse

Physical indicators that a child or young person is being sexually abused

- **Injuries to Genital or Anal Areas** - Bruising, bleeding, swelling, or pain in the genital or anal region, difficulty walking or sitting
- **Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)** - Diagnosis of an STI in a child or young person, genital discharge, itching, or sores
- **Clothing may be damaged or show signs of trauma**

Behavioural indicators that child or young person is being sexually abused

- **Frequent Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs) or Yeast Infections** - Especially when recurrent and unexplained by medical conditions, unexplained pain or discomfort
- **Excessive washing or refusal to bathe**
- **Sexualized Behaviour or Knowledge Beyond Age** - Engages in sexual play or uses sexual language inappropriate for their age, demonstrates knowledge of sexual acts that is not age-appropriate
- **Sudden Changes in Behaviour or Mood** - Becomes withdrawn, anxious, depressed, or fearful, exhibits mood swings or emotional instability
- **Avoidance of Specific People or Places** - Shows fear or reluctance to be around certain individuals, avoids places such as bathrooms or sleep rooms
- **Regression in Development** - Returns to earlier behaviours such as bedwetting, thumb-sucking, or clinginess.
- **Difficulty with Relationships and Trust** - Struggles to form healthy relationships with peers or adults
- **Loss of interest in activities**

Indicators in adult behaviour that could indicate sexual abuse.

- **May be unusually over-protective of a child** - may consistently intervene in the child's interactions with others
- **Is jealous of a child or young person's relationships with peers or other adults or is controlling of the child or young person** - may express resentment or discomfort when the child bonds with others.
- **May favour the victim over other children** - may give the child special privileges, gifts, or attention that are not extended to others.
- **Demonstrates physical contact or affection to a child or young person which appears sexual in nature or has sexual overtones** - may touch the child in ways that are inappropriate, overly intimate, or make others uncomfortable and may use affectionate gestures that are not typical in a professional or caregiving context e.g., stroking, prolonged hugging, or touching near private areas.

Indicators of Family Violence

Physical indicators that a child or young person is being exposed to family violence

- **Unexplained injuries** or frequent bruises
- **Regression** in toileting or sleeping habits
- **Frequent illness** or complaints of headaches/stomach aches without medical cause
- **Delayed speech** or motor skills
- **Poor concentration** or memory

Behavioural indicators that a child or young person is being exposed to family violence

- **Fearfulness or anxiety**, especially around certain adults or in specific settings
- **Aggression or withdrawal** - children may lash out or become unusually quiet and reserved
- **Hypervigilance** - constantly alert or jumpy, as if anticipating danger
- **Low self-esteem or feelings of worthlessness**
- **Difficulty forming relationships with peers or adult**
- **Isolation** from peers or reluctance to go home
- **Overly protective** of other siblings or parent
- **Mature or parentified behaviour** - taking on adult responsibilities or roles

Indicators in adult behaviour that could indicate family violence.

- **Neglect of children's needs** - Failing to provide emotional support, supervision, or basic care due to stress or fear.
- **Inconsistent discipline** - Harsh punishment or complete lack of boundaries.
- **Using children as pawns** - Involving children in adult conflicts.
- **Fearful or avoidant interactions** - Children may show fear around the adult or avoid physical contact
- **Frequent disruptions - Multiple** relocations, school changes, or unexplained absences.