

# 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**

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

- **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***

<p><b><i>Physical indicators that a child or young person is being neglected.</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Poor hygiene</b> - Consistently dirty or unwashed appearance, strong body odour or untreated head lice</li> <li>• <b>Inappropriate clothing</b> - Clothing that is unsuitable for the weather (e.g., no coat in winter), ill-fitting, torn, or excessively worn clothing</li> <li>• <b>Unmet medical or dental needs</b> - Untreated injuries or illnesses, obvious dental decay or infections</li> <li>• <b>Malnutrition or hunger</b> - Noticeable weight loss or failure to thrive, constant hunger.</li> <li>• <b>Persistent Skin Disorders</b> - Nappy rash, skin infections.</li> <li>• <b>Fatigue or listlessness</b> - Appears constantly tired or lacking energy, falls asleep frequently or struggles to stay awake</li> <li>• <b>Developmental delays</b> - Not meeting physical, emotional, or cognitive milestones, difficulty with motor skills or speech</li> <li>• <b>Frequent accidents or injuries</b> - Repeated minor injuries that may suggest lack of supervision, unexplained bruises or marks</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Behavioural indicators that child or young person is being neglected</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Frequent Absences or Tardiness</b> - Regularly non-attendance or arriving late without explanation.</li> <li>• <b>Persistent Hunger or Stealing Food</b> - Eats excessively when food is available</li> <li>• <b>Is very demanding of affection or attention</b></li> <li>• <b>Overly Adult or Caregiver Behaviour</b> - Takes on responsibilities beyond their age (e.g., caring for siblings), appears overly independent or self-reliant</li> <li>• <b>Delayed Development</b> - Struggles with speech, motor skills, or emotional regulation, appears behind peers in learning or behaviour</li> </ul>

*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

<p><b>Behavioural indicators</b> that child or young person is being physically abused.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Fearful or Anxious Behaviour</b> - Appears afraid of going home or being around certain adults, flinches or cowers when approached suddenly</li> <li>• <b>Aggression or Withdrawal</b> - Displays aggressive behaviour toward peers, adults or animals, may be unusually quiet, withdrawn, or overly compliant</li> <li>• <b>Reluctance to Change Clothes or Participate in Physical Activities</b> - Avoids activities that require changing clothes, may try to hide parts of the body</li> <li>• <b>Regression in Development</b> - Reverts to earlier behaviours such as bedwetting or thumb-sucking, shows signs of emotional distress or developmental delays</li> <li>• <b>Hypervigilance</b> - Constantly alert or on edge, as if anticipating danger, difficulty relaxing or concentrating</li> <li>• <b>Disclosures or Hints of Abuse</b> - May talk about being hurt or punished harshly, makes indirect comments that suggest fear or pain</li> <li>• <b>Avoidance of Physical Contact</b> - Resists hugs or physical closeness.</li> <li>• <b>Sudden Changes in Behaviour</b></li> <li>• <b>Inconsistent or Implausible Explanations for Injuries</b> - Provides vague, changing, or unlikely reasons for their injuries</li> </ul>
<p><b>Indicators in adult behaviour</b> that could indicate physical abuse.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Aggressive or Controlling Behaviour</b> - Displays anger or hostility toward the child in public</li> <li>• <b>Inconsistent or Implausible Explanations for Injuries</b> - 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.</li> <li>• <b>Reluctance to Seek Medical Help for the Child</b> - Delays or avoids taking the child to a doctor or hospital, may refuse consent for medical treatment</li> <li>• <b>Minimizing or Denying Harmful Behaviour</b> - Dismisses concerns raised by others about the child's wellbeing, claims injuries are accidental or blames the child</li> </ul>

### **Indicators of Sexual Abuse**

<p><b>Physical indicators</b> that a child or young person is being sexually abused</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Injuries to Genital or Anal Areas</b> - Bruising, bleeding, swelling, or pain in the genital or anal region, difficulty walking or sitting</li> <li>• <b>Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)</b> - Diagnosis of an STI in a child or young person, genital discharge, itching, or sores</li> <li>• <b>Clothing may be damaged or show signs of trauma</b></li> </ul>
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<p><b>Behavioural indicators</b> that child or young person is being sexually abused</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Frequent Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs) or Yeast Infections</b> - Especially when recurrent and unexplained by medical conditions, unexplained pain or discomfort</li> <li>• <b>Excessive washing or refusal to bathe</b></li> </ul>
<p><b>Indicators in adult behaviour</b> that could indicate sexual abuse.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Sexualized Behaviour or Knowledge Beyond Age</b> - Engages in sexual play or uses sexual language inappropriate for their age, demonstrates knowledge of sexual acts that is not age-appropriate</li> <li>• <b>Sudden Changes in Behaviour or Mood</b> - Becomes withdrawn, anxious, depressed, or fearful, exhibits mood swings or emotional instability</li> <li>• <b>Avoidance of Specific People or Places</b> - Shows fear or reluctance to be around certain individuals, avoids places such as bathrooms or sleep rooms</li> <li>• <b>Regression in Development</b> - Returns to earlier behaviours such as bedwetting, thumb-sucking, or clinginess.</li> <li>• <b>Difficulty with Relationships and Trust</b> - Struggles to form healthy relationships with peers or adults</li> <li>• <b>Loss of interest in activities</b></li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>May be unusually over-protective of a child</b> - may consistently intervene in the child's interactions with others</li> <li>• <b>Is jealous of a child or young person's relationships with peers or other adults or is controlling of the child or young person</b> - may express resentment or discomfort when the child bonds with others.</li> <li>• <b>May favour the victim over other children</b> - may give the child special privileges, gifts, or attention that are not extended to others.</li> <li>• <b>Demonstrates physical contact or affection to a child or young person which appears sexual in nature or has sexual overtones</b> - 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.</li> </ul>

### **Indicators of Family Violence**

<p><b>Physical indicators</b> that a child or young person is being exposed to family violence</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Unexplained injuries</b> or frequent bruises</li> <li>• <b>Regression in toileting or sleeping habits</b></li> <li>• <b>Frequent illness</b> or complaints of headaches/stomach aches without medical cause</li> <li>• <b>Delayed speech</b> or motor skills</li> <li>• <b>Poor concentration</b> or memory</li> </ul>
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***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
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***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.