

Red Flags in Children

Some of the psychological signs listed below can show up at other stressful times in a child's life such as divorce, death of a family member, friend or pet, or when there are problems in school, as well as when abuse is involved. Any one sign doesn't mean the child was abused, but several of them mean that you should begin asking questions.

Psychological red flags

- A child who clearly says, "I just don't want to be around Uncle X anymore."
- Any avoidance that is confusing or of concern
- Sudden mood or behavioral shifts, both before and after an encounter with an adult
- Hyperactivity
- Too much sleep, too little sleep, difficulty sleeping, nightmares, or sleep disturbances
- Changes in eating habits (loss of appetite or trouble eating or swallowing)
- Fear of previously likable places and people; fear of making friends; fear of situations, such as being in the dark or being alone; startled responses to loud noises or voices; possible paranoia about being watched or chased
- Aggressive (verbal or physical) defiance, delinquent behavior, excessive risk-taking behaviors
- New words for private body parts
- Difficulty at bath time
- Regression in behavior (i.e., an older child behaving like a young child by doing such things as wetting the bed or sucking a thumb)
- Depression, withdrawal, isolation, self-mutilation, suicide attempts
- Changes in academic performance
- Talking about a new older friend
- Refusing to talk about a "secret" that she or he has with an adult or older child

Physical red flags

- Unexplained bruises, redness, or bleeding of the child's genitals, anus, or mouth
- Unexplained urinary infection or sexually transmitted disease
- Frequent headaches, stomachaches, or body aches
- Fatigue or feeling overly tired or unmotivated
- Heart palpitations or difficulty breathing
- Various sexual reactions, from being overly fearful to being promiscuous
- Unintended pregnancy at an early age
- In younger children, constant rubbing or irritation of genitalia
- Persistent sexual play with other children, themselves, toys, or pets
- Displaying sexual knowledge through language or behavior (beyond what is normal for a child's age)
- Drug or alcohol problems
- Self-destructive behaviors such as scarring arms with razor blades, needles, or cigarettes
- Spacing out at odd times

From "Creating Safe and Sacred Places" p. 30-31