

Child Sexual Abuse Prevention

Signs & Symptoms of Child Sexual Abuse

What Parents and Caregivers Should Know

Children respond to abuse in many different ways. There is **no single sign** that proves sexual abuse has happened. Some children show no obvious signs at all. What matters most is **noticing changes over time** and trusting your instincts.

Possible Behavioral Changes

These behaviors may appear suddenly or feel out of character for your child.

- New fearfulness, withdrawal, sadness, irritability, or anger
- Regression to earlier behaviors (bedwetting, thumb-sucking, clinginess)
- Nightmares, trouble sleeping, or changes in appetite
- Avoiding certain people, places, or activities without a clear reason
- Sexual behaviors, play, or language that are not typical for the child's age
- Increased secrecy, shame, or fear of getting in trouble
- Difficulty concentrating or sudden changes in school performance

Emotional Signs

Children may not have the words to explain what's wrong, but their emotions may show it.

- Anxiety, depression, or low self-esteem
- Excessive guilt or shame
- Strong reactions to touch, boundaries, or being alone with others
- Emotional outbursts that feel unexpected or hard to explain
- Suicidal ideation or attempts

Physical Signs

Many physical symptoms have multiple possible causes and do not automatically mean abuse, but they should be checked by a medical professional.

- Pain, itching, bruising, bleeding, or discomfort in genital or anal areas
- Frequent urinary tract infections or unexplained stomachaches
- Difficulty sitting or walking
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs), particularly in young children
- Unexplained injuries to private areas

Important Things to Know

These behaviors may appear suddenly or feel out of character for your child.

- **Most children are abused by someone they know and trust, not by strangers.**
- Children often disclose **indirectly** through behavior, play, or hints rather than clear statements.
- Many children delay telling or never tell unless they feel safe, believed, and supported.

What to Do If You Are Concerned

You do not need proof to take action.

- Stay calm and notice patterns or ongoing changes
- Gently check in using open, non-leading questions
- Reassure your child they are not in trouble
- Talk with your child's pediatrician or another trusted professional
- If a child discloses abuse, believe them and seek help right away

Support & Next Steps

IF A CHILD IS IN IMMEDIATE DANGER, CALL 911.

Department of Children and Families (DCF)

In Massachusetts, DCF is responsible for ensuring child safety. Contacting DCF can feel stressful or uncertain, especially for families who have had previous involvement. You do not need to be certain to report suspected abuse. You can report any suspected abuse by calling the Massachusetts DCF Child-At-Risk Hotline (800-792-5200).

Contacting DCF does not automatically mean a child will be removed from their home. DCF assesses each situation individually and, when possible, works to connect families with supports to help children remain safely at home. Questions about DCF cases can be submitted through the DCF Ombudsman office at 617-748-2444.

Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs)

Children's Advocacy Centers provide free child-friendly, coordinated support when abuse is suspected.

At a CAC, children and families may receive:

- Multidisciplinary team interventions and forensic interviews
- Victim advocacy
- Medical and mental health services
- Help navigating next steps, all in one place

In Massachusetts, CACs are located throughout the state and coordinated by the **Massachusetts Children's Alliance (MACA)**. Pediatricians, DCF, law enforcement, or MACA can help connect families to a local CAC.

Learn more at ChildrensTrustMA.org and SafeKidsThrive.org.

Trust Your Gut

If something doesn't feel right, it's okay to ask questions and seek guidance. Early support can make a powerful difference in a child's safety and healing.

Remember:

- Many signs of child sexual abuse can have **other explanations**. Noticing a concern does not mean abuse has occurred.
- Taking action is about **supporting and protecting your child**, not getting anyone in trouble. Contacting DCF or seeking medical care **does not automatically mean** a child will be removed from their home.
- Learning or worrying about child sexual abuse can bring up **strong emotions for caregivers**, and you deserve support too. Pediatricians, Children's Advocacy Centers, and counselors can help both children and caregivers. You don't have to handle this alone.
- The most important thing you can do is **listen, stay calm, and believe your child** if they share concerns.

Need Help Now?

- **Emergency: Call 911**
- **DCF Child-At-Risk Hotline: 800-792-5200**
- **MACA: 617-573-9800** to find the nearest Child Advocacy Center
- **Talk with your child's pediatrician** about local referrals and resources

This resource was developed by the Children's Trust of Massachusetts, a statewide public-private organization dedicated to preventing child abuse and neglect by addressing its root causes and strengthening the systems that support families.

