

# SIGNS OF CHILD ABUSE

**Below are indicators of child abuse that can include—but are not limited to—these signs.**

Some signs that a child is experiencing violence or abuse are more obvious than others. Trust your instincts. Suspected abuse is enough of a reason to contact the authorities. You do not need proof.

## **1 Unexplained injuries.**

Visible signs of physical abuse may include unexplained burns or bruises in the shape of objects. You may also hear unconvincing explanations of a child's injuries.

## **2 Changes in behavior.**

Abuse can lead to many changes in a child's behavior. Abused children often appear scared, anxious, depressed, withdrawn or more aggressive.

## **3 Returning to earlier behaviors.**

Abused children may display behaviors shown at earlier ages, such as thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, fear of the dark or strangers. For some children, even loss of acquired language or memory problems may be an issue.

## **4 Fear of going home.**

Abused children may express apprehension or anxiety about leaving school or about going places with the person who is abusing them.

## **5 Changes in eating.**

The stress, fear and anxiety caused by abuse can lead to changes in a child's eating behaviors, which may result in weight gain or weight loss.

## **6 Changes in sleeping.**

Abused children may have frequent nightmares or have difficulty falling asleep, and as a result may appear tired or fatigued.

## **7 Changes in school performance and attendance.**

Abused children may have difficulty concentrating in school or have excessive absences, sometimes due to adults trying to hide the children's injuries from authorities.

## **8 Lack of personal care or hygiene.**

Abused and neglected children may appear uncared for. They may present as consistently dirty and have severe body odor, or they may lack sufficient clothing for the weather.

## **9 Risk-taking behaviors.**

Young people who are being abused may engage in high-risk activities such as using drugs or alcohol or carrying a weapon.

## **10 Inappropriate sexual behaviors.**

Children who have been sexually abused may exhibit overly sexualized behavior or use explicit sexual language.

If you suspect a child is in immediate danger, **call 911.**

If you suspect a child is being abused or neglected, call the WV hotline:  
**1-800-352-6513.**

Visit **wvcan.org** for a list of resources.



**wvcan**

Empowering children. Restoring hope. Ending abuse.

# IF A CHILD DISCLOSES:

## DO

- Remain calm.
- Believe the child.
- Allow the child to talk.
- Show interest and concern.
- Reassure and support the child.
- Take action. It could save a child's life.
- Report within 24 hours, as mandated by WV law.

## DON'T

- Panic or overreact.
- Press the child to talk.
- Promise anything you can't control.
- Confront the offender.
- Blame or minimize the child's feelings.
- Overwhelm the child with questions.

Remember, you are obligated by law to report suspected child abuse.

# REASONS TO BELIEVE CHILDREN WHEN THEY DISCLOSE ABUSE

## 1 It happens more often than we think.

Studies show that 1 in 10 children will be sexually abused before age 18.<sup>1</sup> Every year in West Virginia, more than 4,000 children are assessed at a Child Advocacy Center because of allegations of abuse.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Kids have good reason to stay quiet.

More than 90 percent of the time, children are abused by someone they know,<sup>3</sup> often someone who is supposed to protect them—a person in a position of trust or authority. In almost every case, the only witnesses to this crime are the perpetrator and the victim. Perpetrators often tell the child to keep the abuse a secret or that no one will believe them; the child may even feel the abuse was their fault. For these and many other reasons, children rarely report abuse immediately. Most victims never tell anyone until several years after the abuse, if they ever disclose at all.

## 3 False reports are very uncommon.

Only 2–5% of reports of child sexual abuse are fabricated. Most reports of abuse that turn out to be false are made by adults, not children.<sup>4</sup>

## 4 Your response matters.

Adult survivors of abuse often say being listened to and believed was an important part of their healing.

1. Townsend, C., & Rheingold, A.A., (2013). Estimating a child sexual abuse prevalence rate for practitioners: studies. Charleston, S.C., Darkness to Light. Retrieved from [www.D2L.org](http://www.D2L.org).
2. West Virginia Child Advocacy Network Statewide Data Report (2018). Retrieved from [www.wvcacn.org](http://www.wvcacn.org).
3. Finkelhor, D. (2012). Characteristics of crimes against juveniles. Durham, NH: Crimes against Children Research Center.
4. O'Donohue, W., Cummings, C., Willis, B. (2018). The Frequency of False Allegations of Child Sexual Abuse: A Critical Review. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 27(5): 459–475.



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