



KEEPING KIDS SAFE

Warning Signs of Child Sexual Abuse

Trigger Warning: This document contains information to help recognize the signs and symptoms of child sexual abuse and violence, which may be triggering to survivors.

Most people have a hard time thinking and talking about child sexual abuse, but if we're going to prevent it, we must all think, talk, and take action about it. The Keeping Kids Safe series was created to help parents and primary caregivers learn concrete ways to keep children and teens safe from sexual abuse. The series introduces key concepts and age-appropriate ideas and activities for protecting the children you love and helping them learn and build skills and knowledge that will reduce their risk of being victimized.

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Child sexual abuse is defined as an adult or older child's sexual contact with a child, which may or may not involve physical contact. It is a pervasive global issue that serves as a threat to a child's wellness and safety, and can lead to long-term emotional, psychological, or behavioral impacts. This can include things such as intercourse or sex of any kind and sexual touching, but also moves beyond these iterations to encompass exhibitionism, sex trafficking, or owning or producing child pornography (Rape Abuse and Incest National Network, n.d.-a).

While it is important to remember that the impacts of child sexual abuse are complex and manifest themselves in ways unique to each individual, there are still a number of common possible signs and symptoms to look out for in your work as a volunteer with Michigan State University (MSU) Extension, a parent of a child, or a community member. Being able to recognize the physical, behavioral, and emotional impacts a child may be experiencing as a result of sexual abuse is a vital first step in keeping our children, families, and communities safe.

The following physical, behavioral, and emotional signs are not meant to serve as an exhaustive list of the ways children experiencing sexual abuse may act, feel, or work through their trauma. A child's response is unique to them as an individual and may or may not include the common signs mentioned.

Minding Our Language

In this series of fact sheets, we have chosen to use the inclusive words *they*, *their*, and *them* as singular, nongendered pronouns.

Families and parents come in all shapes, sizes, and styles. A *family* may include people who are related by blood, by marriage, and by choice. *Parents* may be biological, step-, foster, adoptive, legally appointed, or something else.

When we use the words *family* and *parent* in this fact sheet, we do so inclusively and with great respect for all adults who care for and work with young people.





PHYSICAL SIGNS

- Sexually transmitted infections or pregnancy
- Unexplained injuries, especially to the genital area
- Pain, bleeding, or discharge in the genitals, anus, or mouth
- Persistent or recurring pain with urination or bowel movements
- Toileting accidents unrelated to toilet training
- Physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches that cannot be explained

(Arévalo et al., 2014; Mayo Clinic Child and Family Advocacy Center, n.d.; Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, n.d.-a; Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, n.d.-b; Stop It Now, n.d.)

BEHAVIORAL SIGNS

- Knowledge about sexual topics that goes beyond the child's developmental stage (or what is expected for them to know about at their age)
- Withdrawal from previously regular interactions and conversations with peers and parents or activities they previously enjoyed
- Desire to spend an unusual amount of time alone
- Reluctance to leave school or other activities; not wanting to go home
- Trying to avoid certain places or people, especially if they used to be excited to be around those people
- Regressing to behaviors they had grown out of such as wetting the bed or sucking their thumb
- Sexual language, knowledge, or behavior that does not match a child's age (such as acting out a sexual act with toys or inappropriate sexual contact with other children)
- Frequent absences from school or other activities
- Having money, toys, or gifts without being able to explain where they came from
- Refusing to share secrets they share with an older child or adult
- Talking about a new friend that is an older child or adult
- Removing clothing at inappropriate times
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Running away from home
- Fear of closeness with others

(Arévalo et al., 2014; Mayo Clinic Child and Family Advocacy Center, n.d.; Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, n.d.-a; Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, n.d.-b; Stop It Now, n.d.)





EMOTIONAL SIGNS

- Self-harm behaviors (such as cutting or burning) or suicidal behavior
- Nightmares, trouble sleeping, or fear of being alone at night
- Change in mood or personality
- New or increased depression, aggression, worry, or fearfulness
- Changes in eating habits
- Decrease in confidence or the way they feel about themselves
- Thinking of their body as bad or dirty
- Losing interest in school, friends, hobbies, or things they used to love

(Arévalo et al., 2014; Mayo Clinic Child and Family Advocacy Center, n.d.; Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, n.d.-a; Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, n.d.-b; Stop It Now, n.d.)

WHAT DO YOU DO IF A CHILD DISCLOSES ABUSE?

Many children who are the victims of child sexual abuse choose not to report or wait to report for a number of complex reasons. They may be afraid adults will not believe them, they may be worried about getting in trouble or getting someone else in trouble, or they may not have the words to talk about what is happening or has happened to them.

If a child discloses to you that they are being or have been abused, you can do many things to help them; but first and foremost, you must believe them. Disclosing sexual abuse means the child is trusting you to be on their side, and the weight of their decision to disclose to you cannot be overstated. As a trusted adult in their life, you now have the responsibility to take the proper next steps to ensure the child is safe and healthy moving forward. That includes:

- Believing them. Thank them for telling you and having trust that you'll know how to help them.
- Letting the child speak on their own terms. Avoid finishing their thoughts or putting words into their mouths.
- Refraining from investigating or interrogating what they disclose. It isn't your job to prove or disprove child abuse.
- Staying calm. Don't respond with anger, shock, or disgust.
- Never promising to not tell anyone.
- Reassuring the child that they are not in trouble and they didn't do anything wrong.
- Not making overly general statements or promises that you can't keep (such as, "They will go to jail for what they did and you won't ever have to see them again," or "You can come live with me and you'll be safe there.").
- Telling the child that their safety is important to you.





WHAT DO YOU DO IF YOU SUSPECT A CHILD IS BEING ABUSED?

If you are a parent or community member:

If you are a parent, caregiver, or concerned community member and you think a child may be the victim of abuse, you must act quickly. If you are a volunteer in a community agency, you should know the policies and procedures regarding suspected child abuse or neglect and follow those policies. If you believe the child is in immediate danger, call the police. If there is not an immediate danger, file a report with Child Protective Services (CPS), which will trigger an investigation.

You can report suspected child abuse to CPS in Michigan by calling 855-444-3911. Remember to trust your gut instincts.

You do not need to have proof that a child is being abused before you can report it. You are not expected or encouraged to investigate suspected abuse. By filing a report with CPS, you are starting a process where professionals who are trained to identify abuse will investigate and determine if a child is being abused or neglected.

If you are an MSU Extension volunteer:

MSU Extension is dedicated to creating programming environments conducive for all participants, volunteers, and staff. In 4-H, parents and caregivers, volunteers, and staff are responsible to work together to create environments that help to strengthen and promote positive youth development. When youth are supported in this way, they are better prepared with the knowledge, tools, and skills to become responsible citizens and agents of community change.

Volunteers are responsible for creating and supporting these important programming environments. One way this is done is by reporting suspected child abuse; sexual assault; and possession, use, or creation of child pornography. MSU Extension's programs are representative of MSU in communities across the state. Therefore, all MSU Extension volunteers need to be aware of the requirements the university has for individuals who are part of the university community. As individuals embark on their journey as an MSU Extension volunteer, they must be aware of the reporting policies and expectations associated with their volunteer role.

MSU Extension volunteers, regardless of program area, are required to report any suspected child abuse or child neglect they become aware of as part of their volunteer role with MSU Extension. This means that any abuse or neglect they suspect or learn about directly must be reported directly to a local MSU Extension staff member or MSU Police Department and MSU's Office of Institutional Equity (OIE). If a volunteer chooses to report to an MSU Extension staff member, the staff member is required to report this information to the MSU Police Department at 517-355-2222 and MSU OIE.

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**If you are mandated reporter:**

Mandated reporters who suspect child abuse or neglect must make an immediate verbal report to CPS. Mandated reporters are also required to file a written report with CPS within 72 hours. Mandated reporters should follow the rules and regulations for mandated reporters before following any other policy set forth by any employer or organization in which they volunteer.

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EQUIP YOUR CHILD TO LEAD THE BEST LIFE POSSIBLE

Most parents' goals include keeping their kids safe and equipping them to lead the best lives possible. This can seem like a daunting task. The best thing you can do for your child is to pay attention, stay vigilant, be actively involved in their lives, and make informed decisions about things that could affect their safety. Even if these efforts seem scary or overwhelming, being prepared and vigilant are key steps in both protecting your child and helping them build the skills and competencies that will help them stay safe.

This does not mean that you must prevent your child from going anywhere and from doing absolutely everything. It is a reminder, instead, to use common sense, pay close attention to the people and events around your child, set appropriate boundaries, and stay tuned in. You can do a lot of things to protect your child that shouldn't prevent you and your child from living and enjoying the world around you.

RESOURCES

In Michigan, the statewide Sexual Assault Hotline is a free, confidential and anonymous resource available 24/7, offering immediate crisis counseling and referrals by calling 855-VOICES4.

Additionally, the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN) organizes the free, confidential National Sexual Assault Hotline, available 24/7 by calling 800-656-HOPE.

REFERENCES

Arévalo, E., Chavira, D., Cooper, B., & Smith, M. (2014). *SAFE (Screening applicants for effectiveness): Guidelines to prevent child molestation in mentoring and youth-serving organizations*. Friends for Youth Inc.

Mayo Clinic Child and Family Advocacy Center (n.d.). *Child abuse*.
<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/child-abuse/symptoms-causes/syc-20370864>

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network. (n.d.-a). *Child sexual abuse*.
<https://www.rainn.org/articles/child-sexual-abuse>





Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network. (n.d.-b). *Warning signs for young children*.
<https://www.rainn.org/articles/warning-signs-young-children>

Stop It Now! (n.d.). *Tip sheet: Warning signs of possible sexual abuse in a child's behaviors*.
<https://www.stopitnow.org/ohc-content/warning-signs-possible-abuse>

FIND OUT MORE

To find out more about keeping kids safe, check out these other Michigan State University Extension resources:

- **Be SAFE: Safe, Affirming and Fair Environments** (<https://bit.ly/36CwUk7>)—The Be SAFE curriculum is designed to help young people aged 11 to 14 and adults work in partnership to create environments that are physically and emotionally safe. It draws from extensive research from a variety of key disciplines, as well as from evidence-based bullying prevention programs. Be SAFE includes engaging activities that promote social and emotional learning and development, address and prevent bullying, and foster positive relationships with peers and adults. Designed for use in out-of-school time settings (such as 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, Scouts, and after-school programs), Be SAFE also applies to middle school settings.
- **Keeping Kids Safe series** (<https://bit.ly/3jG8JFo>)—The fact sheets in this series are designed for parents and adults who work with kids from birth to age 17. They cover issues related to body ownership, boundaries, and safety; consent; identifying and communicating about feelings; monitoring and limiting technology use; sharing about kids on social media; and recognizing and preventing grooming by child sexual predators. There are currently eight titles in the series:
 - Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 0 to 5: <https://bit.ly/3zLjmhG>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 6 to 11: <https://bit.ly/3f8ecEH>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 12 to 17: <https://bit.ly/3zRbWJB>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: The Downside to “Sharenting” on Social Media: <https://bit.ly/3f9toBl>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: Preventing Grooming by Child Sexual Predators: <https://bit.ly/3ib4vXZ>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: How Child Sexual Predators Groom Children: <https://bit.ly/3BWYRFc>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: How Child Sexual Predators Groom Adults, Families, and Communities: <https://bit.ly/3f8F7jM>
 - Keeping Youth Safe Virtually: Best Practices: <https://bit.ly/2Vl9Cvr>

These resources also contain helpful information on keeping kids safe:

- American Academy of Pediatrics. (n.d.). *Family media plan*. <https://bit.ly/3iE9Wf1>
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2011). American Academy of Pediatrics. (2021). *Sexual abuse*, <https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/resilience/Pages/Sexual-Abuse.aspx>





- Darkness to Light. (n.d.). *Resources*. <https://www.d2l.org/resources/>
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2018). *Preventing child sexual abuse resources*. <https://bit.ly/34zyAYW>

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