



— Menu

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SEARCH

[\(/\)](#) > [Families & Children \(/topics/families-children\)](#) > [Caring for Children \(/topics/caring-for-children\)](#) > [Child Abuse and Neglect \(/child-abuse-and-neglect\)](#)

Warning signs of child abuse and neglect

Learn about the warning signs of child abuse and neglect.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Signs of physical abuse \(#signs-of-physical-abuse-\)](#)[Signs of possible neglect \(#signs-of-possible-neglect-\)](#)[Signs of possible sexual abuse \(#signs-of-possible-sexual-abuse-\)](#)[Signs of possible sexual exploitation or human trafficking \(#signs-of-possible-sexual-exploitation-or-human-trafficking-\)](#)[Contact \(#contact\)](#)

Signs of physical abuse

- Bruising, welts or burns that cannot be sufficiently explained, particularly bruises on the face, lips and mouth of infants or on several surface planes at the same time
- Unusual bruising patterns that reflect the shape of the instrument used to cause injury (e.g., belt, wire hanger, hairbrush, hand, human bite marks)
- Clusters of bruises, welts or burns, indicating repeated contact with a hand or instrument
- Injuries on the body where children usually do not get hurt (e.g., the torso, back, buttocks, thighs, neck)
- Burns that are insufficiently explained, e.g., cigarette burns
 - Immersion burns including marks indicating dunking in a hot liquid, including “stocking” and “glove” burns on feet and hands, or “doughnut” shaped burns on buttocks and genitalia

- Rope or restraint burns on the arms, hands, neck or legs
- Dry burns caused by forced contact with a hot surface (e.g., a clothes iron, hair curler, heater or stove)
- Lacerations and abrasions of the lip, eye, or to any part of a child's face
- Tears in the tissue of the gums, possibly as a result of force-feeding
- Laceration or abrasion to external genitalia
- Absence of hair or hemorrhaging beneath the scalp due to vigorous hair pulling
- Withdrawn, fearful or extreme behavior

Signs of possible neglect

Child or youth

- Shows sudden changes in behavior or school performance
- Is frequently absent from school or child care
- Has not received help for physical or medical problems brought to parent or caregiver's attention
- Has learning problems (or difficulty concentrating) that cannot be attributed to specific physical or psychological causes
- Is always watchful, as though preparing for something bad to happen
- Beggars or steals food or money
- Lacks adult supervision
- Is consistently dirty and has severe body odor
- Lacks sufficient clothing for the weather

Parent or caregiver

- Denies the existence of, or blames the child for, problems in school
- Shows little concern for the child
- Is abusing alcohol or drugs
- Seems apathetic or depressed

Signs of possible sexual abuse

Perceptible Signs of Sexual Abuse

- Difficulty walking or sitting
- Pain or itching in the genital area
- Torn, stained or bloody underclothing

- Bruises or bleeding in external genitalia
- Frequent complaints of stomachaches or headaches
- Venereal disease
- Frequent urinary or yeast infections
- Pregnancy

Behavioral Signs of Sexual Abuse

- Withdrawal or chronic depression
- Inappropriate sex play or premature understanding of sex
- Feeling threatened by physical contact, closeness
- Promiscuity
- Running away from home
- Child is “parentified” or overly concerned for siblings
- Poor self-esteem, lack of confidence
- Peer problems, lack of involvement with friends
- Extreme weight change
- Suicide attempts or threats; especially with adolescents
- Hysteria, lack of emotional control
- Sudden school difficulties
- Unprovoked cruelty to animals

Signs of possible sexual exploitation or human trafficking

- **Instability in life functioning:** Youth lacks access to basic needs, including stable shelter, and is unable to engage in activities expected of her/his age
- **Relationships:** Youth's relationships are concerning, placing him/her at risk or in danger
- **Finances and belongings:** Youth has money or material goods that are incongruent with her/his life circumstances
- **Use of technology:** Youth's use of internet, cell phone or social media involves social or sexual behavior that is atypical for his/her age
- **Physical health:** Youth has significant health problems related to sexual activity and lack of access to basic needs
- **Risky behaviors:** Youth engages in dangerous or risky behaviors, e.g., spending time with abusive partners or in locations where exploitation is known to occur, running away or staying away overnight, using substances)
- **Trauma exposure/signs:** Youth has been exposed to traumatic circumstances and/or exhibits signs and emotional symptoms of trauma exposure
- **Coercion and grooming:** Youth exhibits behaviors or otherwise indicates he/she is being controlled or coerced by another person

- **Exploitation:** Youth has been exposed to sexual exploitation or victimization

Contact

Report Child Abuse

Online

[Find a DCF office near you.](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-department-of-children-families/locations?_page=1) (https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-department-of-children-families/locations?_page=1)

Phone

Child-at-Risk-Hotline **800-792-5200** (tel:8007925200)

Call to report child abuse and neglect.

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