

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE – HOW TO RECOGNISE THE DANGER SIGNS

THE MOST IMPORTANT step in recognising child sexual abuse is to be aware of the possibility of such abuse. In other words you are not going to find sexual abuse if you don't believe it exists.

On the other hand it is impossible to give hard and fast rules for identifying abuse. Each situation is different and each child will find their own way of coping with the abuse, and their own way of trying to tell.

Children do not always know the words to explain clearly what is happening to them. They may try to tell, for example by saying "I don't like him", "He's ugly". "He acts funny". These statements are often misunderstood or ignored. In her book "Keeping Safe", Michelle Elliot* gives one such example.

"One child told her mother that her uncle teased her and she didn't like it. The mother responded that everyone gets teased growing up and she would have to get used to it. The child was very upset but did not say anything else. Several months later, the girl was diagnosed as having gonorrhea of the throat. Her uncle called it teasing and she was too young to know better."

Therefore, although in many cases the child's comment will relate to something harmless, it is worth asking a few gentle questions to find out why they are saying it.

Although there are few "conclusive" signs it is helpful for anyone involved with children and young people to be aware of the types of behaviour often found in children who have been assaulted.

The following list gives some of the signs which could possibly indicate sexual abuse:-

- Repeated urinary infections/pain urinating
- VD
- Stomach aches/cramps
- Unable to sit still (from sore bottom or genitals)
- Incontinence or bedwetting
- Pregnancy

- Bruising especially around genitals
- Chronic eating disorders/anorexia
- Depression
- Suicide attempts
- Self mutilation
- Low self image/self neglect
- Nightmares/insomnia
- Panic attacks
- Compulsive washing/obsessive cleanliness
- Refusing to speak (elective mute)
- Very sudden changes in behaviour
- Running away
- Truancy
- Fear of men/particular man
- Changes in school performance
- Regression to younger behaviour
- Falling asleep in school
- Uncharacteristic behaviour which is interpreted as sexual
- Inappropriate or detailed sexual knowledge in language and drawings

These sorts of behaviour are common to all distressed children, and may not be a reaction to sexual abuse. To add to the difficulties some abused children show none of these signs or symptoms and manage to conceal what is happening to them.

Again, the important think when dealing with any distressed child is that we keep our minds open to the possibility of sexual abuse.

Remember how difficult it is for children to tell openly about sexual abuse – it is through these, and other signs, that children are asking for permission to tell, and for an end to the abuse.

** Keeping Safe by Michelle Elliot, pub. Bedford Square Press, 1988.*

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