

Possible risk indicators of child abuse

The possible risk indicators of child abuse presented here are taken from the Sussex Child Protection and Safeguarding Procedures Volume 1. Whilst such indicators are frequently found in child abuse cases their presence is not proof that child abuse has occurred. However, if such indicators are present action is required. Further examples and more detailed information is contained in the Procedures which can be found as a 'pdf' document on the intranet, see 'BRA Shared' area in the 'Child Protection' folder.

3.2.2... In an abusive relationship:

The child may:

- appear frightened of the parents
- act in a way that is inappropriate to his age and development.

The parent or carer may:

- persistently avoid child health services and treatment of the child's illnesses
- have unrealistic expectation of the child
- frequently complain about/to the child and fail to provide attention or praise
- be absent
- be misusing substances
- persistently refuse to allow access to the home
- be involved in domestic violence
- be socially isolated
- not be honest with other.

3.2.7... Recognition of physical abuse:

Bruising

Children can have accidental bruising, but the following must be considered as suspicious:

- bruising in or around the mouth
- two simultaneous bruised eyes, without bruising to the forehead
- repeated or multiple bruising on the head or other non-accidental sites
- the outline of an object used e.g. belt marks, hand prints or a hair brush
- bruising around the face
- grasp marks
- bruising on the arms, buttocks and thighs may be an indicator of sexual abuse.

Bite Marks

Bite marks leaving impressions of the teeth.

Burn and Scalds

Any burn with a clear outline may be suspicious, e.g.:

- circular burns from cigarettes
- frictions burns from being dragged
- linear burns from hot metal rods or elements
- burns of uniform depth over a large area
- scalds that have a line indicating immersion or liquid
- old scars which did not have appropriate treatment.

Fractures

Fractures may cause pain, swelling and discoloration over a bone or joint.

There are grounds for concern if:

- the history provided is vague, non-existent or inconsistent with the fracture type
- there are multiple fractures or old fractures
- medical attention is sought after a period of delay when a fracture caused symptoms e.g. swelling, pain or loss of movement.

3.2.31... Recognition of emotional abuse:

- abnormal attachment between a child and parent or carer
- persistent negative comments from parent/carers or 'scape-goating' of a child within a family
- failure to thrive/faltering growth
- where a child is withdrawn and/or aggressive
- behavioural problems eg aggression, attention seeking
- frozen watchfulness
- low self esteem/confidence, fearful, distressed
- poor relationships with peers, including withdrawn or isolated
- dysfunctional family including domestic violence.

3.2.34... Recognition of sexual abuse:

Boys of all ages may be sexually abused and scared to say anything due to guilt and/or fear. This is particularly difficult for a child to talk about.

Recognition can be difficult, unless the child discloses and is believed. There may be no physical signs and indications are likely to be emotional or behavioural.

Behavioural indicators:

- inappropriate sexualised conduct
- sexually explicit behaviour, play or conversation, inappropriate to the child's age
- continual and inappropriate or excessive masturbation
- self-harm (including eating disorder), self mutilation and suicide attempts
- involvement in prostitution or indiscriminate choice of sexual partners
- an anxious unwillingness to remove clothes for - e.g. sports events (but this may be related to cultural norms or physical difficulties)
- running away.

Physical indicators:

- pain or itching of genital area
- sexually transmitted diseases
- blood on underclothes
- physical symptoms e.g. injuries or to genital or anal area, bruising to buttocks, abdomen and thighs, presence of semen on anus, external genitalia or clothing.

3.2.36... Recognition of neglect:

- an unkempt, inadequately clothed, dirty or smelly child
- a child who is perceived to be frequently hungry
- recurrent/untreated infections or skin conditions
- unmanaged/untreated health/medical conditions
- frequent accidents or injuries
- poor self-esteem
- child left with adults who are intoxicated or violent
- child abandoned or left alone for excessive periods.