

# **Has This Child Been Sexually Abused?**

Carey Sturgeon

Sexual abuse has lifelong emotional, psychological, and behavioural effects on its victims. Even those who show few outward signs may be struggling with emotional or psychological trauma. So how will you know if a young person has been sexually abused?

## **What Is Abuse?**

Sexually abuse is not just sexual intercourse. It also includes touching of personal areas outside or inside clothing, oral sex, and vaginal or anal penetration with different objects. Both boys and girls experience sexual abuse. It is important for children who have been sexually abused to have medical exams.

## **Common Effects**

The common physical effects of sexual abuse are cuts or sores on the mouth or genitals, frequent headaches, and sexually transmitted diseases.

There are many common emotional effects. They include anxiety, fear, anger, and emotional numbness. Children and teens who have been sexually abused often distrust other people, even those who are trying to help them. They often have low self-esteem. They often believe they are without value or that they are unlovable. Many suffer from hopelessness. They may have flashbacks or nightmares about the abuse, where they replay the abuse in their minds.

## **Common Behaviours**

Children and teens who have been sexually abused share many common behaviours. Their sleeping and eating habits may change. They may run away from home or turn to drugs and alcohol to numb their pain. They may withdraw from other people. Some may act out sexually.

Some abused young people misbehave on purpose. They may be trying to prove that they really are worthless and unlovable. They expect others to give up on them. Some may feel numb and cut themselves to try to feel anything, even pain. Or they may take part in self-destructive behaviours in order to distract themselves from their emotional pain. Professional help is required for children who experience flashbacks, extreme anxiety, cutting, or other self-destructive behaviours.