



# TIP SHEET

## Child sexual assault: Effects and indicators

**Bravehearts**  
Educate Empower Protect  
Our Kids

Children and adolescents who have been sexually assaulted can suffer a range of psychological and behavioural problems, from mild to severe, in both the short and long term. These effects vary depending upon the circumstances of the abuse and the child's developmental stage.

### POTENTIAL INDICATORS IN CHILDREN

- Unusual or new fears, sometimes around touch
- Difficulty concentrating or with memory
- Eating or sleeping changes
- Fear of being alone with a particular person
- Sexual themes in artwork, stories, play etc.
- Showing a knowledge of sexual behaviour beyond their years
- Bed-wetting or soiling after being toilet trained
- 'Acting out' behaviours (aggression, destructive behaviours, truanting behaviour)
- 'Acting in' behaviours (withdrawal from friends and family, depression)
- Vaginal, penile or anal soreness, discharge or bleeding
- Problems with friends and schoolwork
- Vague symptoms of illness such as headache or tummy ache
- Self-harm (cutting, risky behaviour)
- Zoning out or not listening

Children and young people of all cultures, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and ages may be sexually assaulted. Above all else, it is important to pay attention to behavioural changes in your children, and **take them seriously if they disclose**.

It is important to understand that the impacts and effects of child sexual assault can sometimes be minimised. However, survivors who are supported and believed when they speak out are less likely to endure long terms negative impacts.

### POTENTIAL SHORT TERM EFFECTS

- Increased illness, body aches or other physical complaints
- Poor attendance or performance at school
- Difficulty concentrating or memory loss
- Mood changes
- Regressive behaviours
- Sleeping and eating disorders
- Lack of self-esteem
- Nightmares
- Self-harm or suicidal thoughts
- Self-hatred or reduced self esteem
- Disinhibited behaviour
- Aggression
- Zoning out or not listening

### POTENTIAL LONG TERM EFFECTS

- Suicidal ideation
- Post-traumatic stress
- Sexual difficulties
- Inability to form lasting relationships
- Identity difficulties
- Relationship problems
- Parenting difficulties
- Alcohol and substance misuse
- The development of violent behaviour
- The development of criminal behaviour

NEED SUPPORT OR MORE INFORMATION?  
Bravehearts Information and Support Line  
FREECALL **1800 272 831**  
Mon-Fri 8:30am - 4:30pm AEST

[bravehearts.org.au](http://bravehearts.org.au)