

Recognising the signs of child abuse

Rindy was a young child entering the child welfare system because she was in need of protection. Her grandfather, the person who was supposed to spoil her with healthy hugs, the occasional sweet and lots of stories about long, long ago, took her childhood from her through his inappropriate sexual actions.

During a projection technique done by her social worker she had to identify herself in a specific picture. Instead of choosing one of the two possible girls in the picture she chose the picture of the toilet. "That is me," she said. She is thirteen years old today. It took a few years for that picture of herself to develop in Rindy's mind.

Every reasonable adult will respond in horror to the story of this young girl. However, not every reasonable adult knows how to recognise a situation that requires them to intervene or, for that matter, how they can intervene.

Sexual abuse is happening every day in our country and according to the South African Police Service (SAPS); children are the victims of 41 % of all rapes reported. South African police estimate that a woman is raped every 36 seconds and one Trade Union report estimates that a child is raped in South Africa every three minutes. Some children in abusive relationships may be molested and/or raped repeatedly over a long time. Physical abuse involves physical aggression directed at a child by the care-giver. A study done by the South African Medical Research council in 2009 showed that South Africa had more than a thousand child homicides annually. This is nearly three child homicides per day. Nearly half (44.5%) of all child homicides were due to child abuse and neglect.

There can be little doubt that our children are in danger. And the greatest danger comes from the people that should nurture, protect and develop them – people in their own homes. Should the definition of a "home" not be that it is the safest place for the child?

How does one become aware that a child is possibly exposed to abuse?

Adults that work with children (like teachers, nurses and child care workers) are often in a position to identify signs of abuse. There are two ways to tell if a child is being abused. The obvious one is to look for signs of physical abuse. The other is by observing how the child acts. If one sees these signs often or in combination, the child may be the victim of abuse.

Physical indicators are not always that visible but adults may become aware of a child that:

- Exhibits bruises and/or broken bones that he cannot explain and also bruises in different stages of healing. One should look at the shape of the bruise as it can indicate a specific pattern such as a belt buckle, a rope or an electrical cord.
- Has burn marks that cannot be explained, that looks like cigarette burns or have a pattern like a stove plate.
- Returns after a period of absence and presents with injuries.
- Complains about pain in their genital area and infections and discharges occur on a regular basis. A medical opinion is needed.
- Present with other physical signs which may include a vacant or frozen stare on the child's face,
- Manifests with somatic health complaints such as stomach-aches and vomiting
- Has difficulty walking and/or sitting need to be investigated
- Fails to meet milestones with respect to physical development

Behavioural indicators that the children present on a more regular basis:

- A child may disclose abuse by telling their own story or tell the story of a “friend”.
- Behaviours like inappropriate sexual activities can be an indication of sexual abuse. These activities include promiscuity or seductive behaviour from a young child, obsession or unusual interest with sexual talk, jokes and with his own genitalia and that of other children.
- Excessive masturbation to the point of injury and masturbation in front of others is suspicious
- If a child forces another child to be part of sexual activities, it may be a sign of possible exposure to sex and or abuse.
- Behaviour like bed-wetting in older children or even wetting or soiling pants throughout the day is an indication of possible abuse.

Behaviour that is much more subtle and may indicate that a child has been through some trauma may also indicate either physical or sexual abuse

It is not safe to assume that a child with some of these more subtle behaviours is indeed being exposed to abuse. If one observes some of the behaviour that follows together with some of the physical indicators and sexual behaviours indicated above, one may come to the conclusion that such a child needs help.

- Behaviours such as an inability to relate to children from the same age.
- Regressive behaviours such as bed-wetting and thumb-sucking.
- Depression, aggression and fear/mistrust towards adults are indicative of a traumatic experience or personal problems and may indicate abuse.
- Sometimes a child may act much older and wiser than his own age.
- A child may talk about a secret in his life that nobody can know of.
- When a child’s behaviour suddenly changes (eg an obedient child may suddenly become defiant and rebellious).
- Sudden changes in school attendance, involvement in recreational activities, schoolwork (loss of interest and low performance).
- Avoidance of certain people or places, as well as a fear to go home.
- A fear of undressing in front of other children or the sudden wearing of extra layers of clothes is cause for concern. Sometimes abused children (especially girls) will wear baggy sweaters even in very hot weather.
- Caregivers may experience that a child develops a new pattern of recurrent nightmares, disturbed sleep and fear of the dark.

Abused children experience a lot of traumatic and conflicting feelings. The experience of abuse is an invasion of one’s body and if it happens over and over again, the child receives the message that he/she is “damaged goods”, helpless, guilty and bad. They will ask why it happens to them and not to others. It is natural for abused children to take the blame on themselves and they therefore internalize the message that they are nothing more than objects – to be used, hurt and invaded.

These children develop deep-seated depression that may lead to suicidal tendencies, apathy about their lives, lack of interest in schoolwork, a craving for immediate release of stress such as substance abuse or excessive sexual activities. Self-hurt often occurs as the child tries to release cropped up pain or to get attention and spill the story without having to tell. The abused child may also become very anxious and show unpredictable behaviour such as being very sad one moment and then very excited and hyper-active the next.

The behaviour of parents, can also give one an indication of probable abuse. Teachers, medical staff and caregivers should be wary of parents that show no tenderness and caring for their child and fail to recognise their child’s distress (they often deny that any problems exist at all). Other warning signs are when parents’ talk about their child is consistently negative and if they say things such as that the

child is “evil”, “good-for-nothing”, or if they boast about the excessive punishment which they use to discipline their child.

One happy, carefree child also had to do a projection technique once. She was asked to portray herself as an animal. She refused – she said she did not want to be any animal because she firmly believed she was a princess. Most reasonable adults will prefer this sentiment over the one expressed by Rindy.

What are these reasonable adults to do though, when they suspect or know of a child that is being abused? Every day that the child is exposed to further abuse causes harm and increases the long-term damage to that child.

The law requires responsible adults to report suspected child abuse. It may be easier to turn your back and not interfere in something you regard as not your business. Child abuse is your business. It is the business of society as a whole and every individual in it. Still, one does not want to interfere in a situation where one can do more damage than good, so making wild accusations when uncertain of the truth may be ill-advised. This is what you should do:-

- Collect all relevant information. Identify information of the suspected victim and, where possible, the suspected perpetrator.
- Record the home or school address.
- Record all physical and behavioural signs that cause you to suspect abuse, where possible with dates.
- Report this to a local child care organisation. A list of such organisations can be obtained from the website of the Department of Social Development - <http://www.dsd.gov.za/>.
- Alternatively, you can call the well-known Childline number at 08 000 55 555 (www.childlinesa.org.za) or Child Welfare SA at 0861 4 CHILD (24453) / 011 452 4110 (www.childwelfaresa.org.za) to report the abuse.

We call on all reasonable and responsible adults to make a pledge to care and to act. Only by acting with common purpose will we make a difference in the lives of such children and start winning the battle against the plague of child abuse.

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About the Author

Maretha van Zyl has been the Manager Childcare Services at Abraham Kriel Childcare for the past 20 years. She is responsible for the development of the specialist treatment programmes for the children in our care. She has made a particular contribution to the development of programmes for children with deep seated trauma as a result of sexual abuse. She has also developed a training programme for Childcare workers, working with traumatised children. The SETA accreditation of the training programme is currently in its final stages.