

# Child Protection: It's everybody's business

## Information Sheet 1. Indicators of Child Sexual Assault

**BRAVE HEARTS**



*"Making a difference in child protection"*

Children often lack the words to describe sexual assault, therefore finding it exceptionally difficult to disclose. The fear of a negative reaction and possible punishment can also stop them from speaking out.

Children may try to subtly open the conversation by asking "Do you like so and so?... I don't" or "I've got a secret". Unfortunately, the more severe the degree of abuse the less likely it is that the child/young person will disclose. This is why it is

important for parents, teachers, carers, child protection workers, counsellors etc., to be vigilant for symptoms of sexual assault.

There are a number of physical and behavioural symptoms that indicate a child or young person may have been harmed.

The possible signs of harm should be viewed as "red flags" - a sign that something may be worrying the child. It should not be automatically assumed that abuse is occurring, talking to the child may reveal something quite innocent. It is

important, however, not to dismiss significant changes in behaviour, fears, or physical symptoms.

### Common Indicators of Child Sexual Assault

- Fear of being hurt during nappy change or dressing
- Loss of concentration
- Development of eating disorders
- Fear of being alone with a particular person
- Sexual themes in artwork, stories, play etc.
- Showing a knowledge of sexual behaviour beyond their years
- Bedwetting or soiling after being toilet trained
- "Acting out" behaviours; for example, aggression, destructive behaviours, truanting behaviour
- "Acting in" behaviours; for example, withdrawal from friends, depression
- Vaginal, penile or anal soreness, discharge or bleeding
- Problems with friends and schoolwork
- Vague symptoms of illness such as headache or tummy ache
- Bruises, bite marks or other injuries to breasts, buttocks, lower abdomen
- Difficulty walking or sitting
- Inappropriate displays of affection or sexualised play
- Over attention to adults of a particular sex



*For advice on how you should respond to any concerns, see Information Sheet 3 "How should I respond?"*

#### **Facts:**

Boys and girls of all cultures, ethnic backgrounds and ages may be sexually assaulted

Child sexual assault occurs in all kinds of families

The offender in the majority of cases is known to the child.