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## *Warning Signs of Sexual Abuse for Children with Disabilities*

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am neither an expert nor trained to identify warning signs of sexual abuse in children with disabilities, but I have encountered many such situations throughout my legal career. Over time, I have developed an informal list of “red flags” that cause me to pause, take notice, and consult appropriate agencies. Before I share that list with you, I want to discuss a few common phrases that I hear repeatedly from others (including parents).

*Myth #1: “The teacher/priest/friend/colleague/grandparent (fill-in-the-blank here) is so nice and understands my child. He/she would never abuse my child.”*

*Fact:* An abuser’s social or economic status, educational background and appearance are irrelevant! An abuser may be a teacher, your best friend, relative, babysitter, coach, priest, the person reporting the alleged abuse, etc.

*Fact:* An abuser can be any age. The youngest abuser I have encountered was in pre-kindergarten. The oldest abuser I have encountered was a grandparent.

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*Myth #2: “My child could never be abused. He/she would tell me if someone tried to do something inappropriate to him/her.”*

*Fact:* A victim can be any age. The youngest victim I have encountered was a newborn baby. The oldest victim I have encountered was an adult. Abusers often use threats or shame to silence a victim.

*Fact:* A child may express shame or believe that he/she “consented to” or “asked for” or “deserved” the sexual abuse. How can a child “consent to,” “ask for,” or “deserve” to be violated by another person?

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*Myth #3: “A female would never hurt my daughter or son.” Or, a “male would never hurt my son or daughter.”*

*Fact:* Gender is irrelevant! Females abuse other females and/or males. Males abuse other males and/or females.

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*Myth #4: “My son/daughter needs access to social internet sites on his/her computer or cell phone to stay connected with his/her peers (or to do homework).”*

*Fact:* It has been my experience (repeatedly) that social internet sites can be dangerous. A child can accidentally access an adult site, which can lead to future inappropriate visits to such sites. Or, a child can become so addicted to social internet or pornography sites that he/she will lie and steal to access them.

*Fact:* Many children have more than one social internet site or identity. Do not assume that your child is using his/her legal name. Research and verify your child’s activities on his/her computer and cell phone. It’s your responsibility to protect your child.

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*Myth #5: “My best friend would never harm my son/daughter.”*

*Fact:* Abusers can be very patient. Some abusers “groom” a child (or the child’s parents) for years before any actual abuse occurs. The actual process can occur slowly, so parents may not notice the subtle signs in real-time. Things that I watch for include: cards, small gifts, outings with your child (even during school hours), frequent offers to carpool/take your child to a sporting event, the adult acting as a communication liaison between you and your child, etc.

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*Myth #6:* “My child could never be abused because I chaperone every (fill-in-the blank) event.”

*Fact:* Abusers can be incredibly covert. In fact, you may be sitting in the very same room (or vehicle) while the abuse is occurring to your child.

Again, I have heard the above comments from adults and children many times. When I hear any of these phrases, I ask myself what “red flags,” if any, are present.

My informal list of “red flags” or warning signs include the following:

- Sleeping (too much, too little, nightmares, talking during sleep);
- Requests to sleep in parents’ room;
- Sleeping with the lights on;
- Eating (too much, too little, eating disorders);
- Hoarding food (especially sweets);
- Excessive cavities (*e.g.*, from acid reflux);
- Avoidance of an activity, class, or sport that the child previously enjoyed;
- Excessive or new fears/anxieties (especially of a person, place, smell, food, etc.);
- Change in dressing habits (promiscuous or “baggy” clothing);
- “Baby talk”;
- “Cutting,” self-mutilation (particularly on parts of the body that cannot be seen easily);
- Regression in adaptive living skills (toileting, eating, dressing);
- Wetting or soiling oneself (day or night time);
- Emotional “roller-coaster” (angry outbursts and/or withdrawal);
- Aggression (physical, verbal, or sexual) toward toys, peers, adults, or animals;
- Masturbation (consider age of the child and frequency of masturbation);
- Child cuts “holes” in stuffed animals, mattresses or pillows;
- Infections (urinary or genital);
- Preoccupation with electronics (*e.g.*, cell phone or computer);



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- “Sexting” (texting sexual content or pictures) via cell phone or other electronic device;
- Child lies or sneaks-around during nighttime to access prohibited electronics even if the parent has placed it in a locked safe (or password-protected the device);
- Excessive thoughts or discussion about sexual topics, pornography, etc.;
- Interest in or knowledge of sexual acts/topics that are not age-appropriate;
- Decline in homework/grades.

The above list is not exhaustive. Listen to your child. Is your child talking favorably (or negatively) about a particular adult or peer? Has your child been invited to attend a function or to do something “special” with a teacher (possibly during school hours)? For me, the most important thing a parent can do is to trust his/her instinct. If something does not feel “right” to you, then there is a reason! Do not make excuses or delay your inquiry on the hope/desire that your instinct is wrong. Too much is at stake if you are correct.