

## **YOUTH WHO HAVE BEEN SEXUALLY, PHYSICALLY OR EMOTIONALLY ABUSED**

**Members of this cluster have experienced sexual, physical, and/or severe emotional abuse.** These children have suffered severe trauma, but many seem blocked from feeling physical or emotional pain. They have low self-esteem and they may believe the abuse or violence was their fault. Their physical and emotional boundaries have been violated and often significant people in their lives have abused them or failed to protect them. Thus, they have difficulty trusting anyone or themselves. Members of this cluster may have witnessed abuse or feared that their siblings and/or parents were being victimized. With all that has happened to them, members of this cluster tend to be secretive and guarded about the abuse. They don't tell others that it is happening and may even deny it when confronted about it by those trying to help them.

**It is not uncommon for younger members of this cluster to have irrational fears or nightmares.** Many are easily startled and/or may be fearful of loud noises. In addition, they may have symptoms of anxiety, phobias or engage in ritualistic behaviors. Some may attempt to gain a sense of control by acting out against others. Some may try to hurt, or physically or sexually abuse other children. In extreme cases, they may set fires or harm animals. While younger children may show these responses more immediately after their abuse, the behaviors can also emerge at a later date and developmental stage, including adulthood.

**When the abuse starts during adolescence, some cluster members show obvious changes in their personal relationships and behavior.** They may withdraw from their usual peer group or their grades may drop. They may begin to associate with teens that are more oppositional and have more severe behavior problems. They may engage in self-injurious behavior, become suicidal, or develop eating disorders.

**Cluster members who have been sexually abused may have difficulty with normal sexual development. They may continually talk about the abuse, masturbate compulsively, or play out the abusive events.** Their personal hygiene may deteriorate, or conversely, they may establish cleansing rituals such as needing to take frequent showers. Many have difficulty understanding sexuality, appropriate sexual behavior, and/or their sexual identity. They may dress in highly seductive clothes, act out sexually, and BE seen as promiscuous. Younger children may be sexually precocious, often being preoccupied with information typically above their developmental level. Teenagers of both genders may develop pseudo-relationships based solely on sex. Some find protection by making themselves unattractive—not wearing makeup, wearing shapeless clothing or even becoming overweight. Others may avoid age appropriate situations or relationships that may result in sexual behavior or intimacy. Children in this cluster are often exposed to adult environments that tend to be over-sexualized. For instance, pornographic materials may be left out at home, and adults may wear provocative clothing and tell dirty jokes in front of the kids.

Parents of cluster members may devote a good deal of energy presenting the family as normal. The perpetrators frequently use intimidation, threats, guilt, and rewards to control others. Members of this cluster may feel guilt as well as fear, and may be discouraged from involving themselves outside the home. Without trusting relations with family members or peers, children in this cluster are isolated. Some won't tell others about the abuse because they don't want to be removed from their home. At other times, when children do tell about the abuse, they are not believed or protected.

**Cluster members, even in the same family, may react differently to their experiences of violence and/or abuse:**

- **Some act out and can be seen as having behavior problems.** They may misbehave at the end of the school day in order to incur a detention so they can avoid having to go back home where it is not safe. Some attempt to control others through the use of verbal threats or violence.
- **Others become withdrawn, depressed, and occasionally suicidal!** They are anxious and fearful but keep their hurt inside. They may take on the victim role and may set themselves up for further abuse. For instance, they may date individuals who verbally, sexually, or physically abuse them.
- **A third subgroup acts older than their chronological age.** They become the adult in the family, very responsible at home and high achievers at school. They may assume the care of siblings and replace the parent in other roles.
- **In contrast, a fourth subgroup acts younger than they are.** Adolescents may throw temper tantrums or run away from home. Younger children may revert to baby talk, thumb-sucking, soiling, or tantrums.

**Members of this cluster often live in families where parents show little respect for each other or their children.** Many of the parents are themselves victims of abuse and often lack good parenting skills. They yell at their children and may physically or sexually abuse them. They don't respect their children's personal privacy, personal boundaries, or property. They don't listen to what they say and don't seem to care what goes on in their lives. They may treat other's children much better than they do their own. Parents who are the perpetrators of abuse often use anger and power to control the other family members.

**Despite the violence and/or abuse they have suffered, some cluster members have developed ways to cope.** They appear to be tough, strong, and resilient. Some have been able to compartmentalize the abusive situation and seem better adjusted. Some cluster members are able to survive the abuse and lead healthy lives. However, at different times later in their lives, they may have difficulties or stressful periods during which these issues may re-emerge.