

## RECOGNIZING SEXUAL OR PHYSICAL ABUSE IN PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

### How do you know when a person with a disability has been abused?

- ◇ A person might not have the language to tell you exactly what has happened, but may do so through behavior or other signs. Be careful not to label all behaviors as “problems”.
- ◇ The easiest way to find out if someone has been abused is to ask e.g. “Did anyone hurt you? or “Are you afraid of anyone?”. Abuse is so common among people with disabilities, it should be asked about *routinely*.
- ◇ Use your intuition. Often your feelings that something is amiss are correct.
- ◇ When you begin paying attention and asking, you must be prepared for the information you receive.
- ◇ Examine your own feelings and comfort level. You may need assistance in getting the information.
- ◇ People sometimes retract their statements due to fear, confusion, pressure, or frustration with system responses. They may get mixed up about time sequences. Not being able to talk well about the situation is not the same as lying.
- ◇ Whenever a sudden or dramatic change in behavior is observed, explore the possible cause.
- ◇ You may see some of the same physical and behavioral indicators with both sexual assault (SA) and physical abuse (PA), but some are more common with one or the other.
- ◇ *The following list is not all-inclusive nor does it necessarily mean sexual or physical abuse has occurred if these behaviors are present. There may be other explanations, such as medical issues, which should be explored first.*

### Physical Indicators:

(If any of these are present, there should be a medical examination.)

#### SA and PA:

- Bruises
- Cuts
- Scratches

**SA Only:**

- Semen
- Hair (pubic, other)
- Tears, scarring, swelling, bleeding in genital area or anus
- Genital pain and itching
- Sexually transmitted disease
- Ulcers, infections or other gynecological problems
- Pregnancy
- Weight gain (or loss)
- Difficulty in walking, sitting, coordination
- Odor - a change in taking care of personal hygiene

**Behavioral Indicators:****SA and PA:**

- Sudden fears or avoidance of specific situations or people
- Shying away from being touched
- Acting out, attention seeking, or delinquent behaviors
- Aggression
- Overly compliant
- Poor peer relationships or inability to make friends
- Sudden changes in work performance
- Non-participation in work or social activities
- Inability to concentrate (could manifest as poor attention span)
- Running away from home
- Sleep disturbances - may include bedwetting, nightmares, and restlessness
- Clinical depression
- Self-mutilating behavior
- Suicidal feelings
- Recurrent physical complaints - especially stomachaches

**SA Only:**

- Hints about sexual activity
- Compulsive masturbation or persistent and inappropriate sex play with self or toys
- Sexually aggressive or seductive towards others - promiscuous
- New or detailed understanding of sexual behavior
- Regressive behaviors, or behavior characteristic of someone much younger
- Wearing multiple layers of clothing
- Urinating or defecating in clothing