



behaviours,” von Bodelschwingh says. Sometimes teachers become suspicious if a child is often so tired that they fall asleep at school.

“Some children are so exhausted because they’ve got to be awake and vigilant at night and hardly sleep,” she points out.

All of these “signs” could have other causes, of course. “That’s why it’s important to talk with the child,” advises the Germany-wide help portal Sexual Abuse.

What should you do if you suspect that your child has been sexually abused?

The right strategy is to build trust, take time, do something together and tactfully ask the child how they are by saying something like, “I’m worried about you. You look sad and have changed,” says von Bodelschwingh, adding that you shouldn’t press the issue and can bring it up later if need be.

Another approach might be saying, “Not everything adults do is good for kids. Then it’s OK to talk about it.” You could also explain that some secrets don’t feel good keeping, and so you’re allowed to reveal them.

The Sexual Abuse help portal discourages asking questions that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no,” such as, “Did the person hurt you?” Open-ended questions are better, such as, “What did you do together?”

But here, too, avoid any pressure. Otherwise the child may completely clam up – you mustn’t forget that perpetrators of child sexual abuse typically make their victims promise to say nothing about it.

May I be missing veiled cries for help?

Be it out of shame or feelings of guilt, it’s difficult for a sexually abused child to put what’s happened into plain words.

Von Bodelschwingh says for example, a child may complain to her mother that she was asked to do something by a known, older relative and she doesn’t like it.

The mother, caught up in everyday stress, may fail to recognise the words’ true meaning and dismiss the complaint by saying, “Then just tell him you don’t like it!” As simple as that.

“For the child, this ends the matter,” von Bodelschwingh says from experience.

“They think, ‘Well, I’ve told Mama, so now she knows what’s going on. And I won’t tell her again.’” The penny often drops for the parent later.

How should you react if your child confides sexual abuse to you?

“If your child tells you they’ve been sexually abused,” says von Bodelschwingh, rule number one is to “let them know that you believe them and are sticking by their side.” Be there for them and don’t try to have the alleged perpetrator brought to book.

Rule number two is not to ask for details. “That should be left to the specialists,” she says. She also warns against belabouring the matter by saying, for example, “Tell me again exactly what happened!”

The Sexual Abuse help portal advises that you take time to consider what steps to take.

You tell the child you’ve got to think about the right thing to do to help them.

When you’ve decided, you let them know.

It’s important not to promise the child that you’ll keep everything to yourself, since it would then be impossible to help.

What you should do, though, is to write down all of the child’s observations and statements. – dpa