

## **Child Abuse**

### **Signs & Symptoms; Attitudes & Actions**

#### **What is Child Abuse?**

Child abuse, or child maltreatment, is an act by a parent or caretaker that results in or allows the child to be subjected to death, physical injury, sexual assault, or emotional harm. Emotional abuse, neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse are all different forms of child abuse.

Child abuse is more than bruises and broken bones. While physical abuse might be the most visible, other types of abuse, such as emotional abuse and neglect, also leave deep, lasting scars. The earlier abused children get help, the greater chance they have to heal and break the cycle—rather than perpetuating it. By learning about common signs of abuse and what you can do to intervene, you can make a huge difference in a child's life.

#### **Types of Child Abuse**

There are several types of child abuse, but the core element that ties them together is the emotional effect on the child. Children need predictability, structure, clear boundaries, and the knowledge that their parents are looking out for their safety. Abused children cannot predict how their parents will act. Their world is an unpredictable, frightening place with no rules. Whether the abuse is a slap, a harsh comment, stony silence, or not knowing if there will be dinner on the table tonight, the end result is a child that feels unsafe, uncared for, and alone.

##### **➤ Emotional child abuse**

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me? Contrary to this old saying, emotional abuse can severely damage a child's mental health or social development, leaving lifelong psychological scars. Examples of emotional child abuse include:

- Constant belittling, shaming, and humiliating a child.
- Calling names and making negative comparisons to others.
- Telling a child he or she is "no good," "worthless," "bad," or "a mistake."
- Frequent yelling, threatening, or bullying.
- Ignoring or rejecting a child as punishment, giving him or her the silent treatment.
- Limited physical contact with the child—no hugs, kisses, or other signs of affection.
- Exposing the child to violence or the abuse of others, whether it be the abuse of a parent, a sibling, or even a pet.

**Warning Signs of Emotional Abuse:**

- ✓ Excessively withdrawn, fearful, or anxious about doing something wrong.
- ✓ Shows extremes in behavior (extremely compliant or extremely demanding; extremely passive or extremely aggressive).
- ✓ Doesn't seem to be attached to the parent or caregiver.
- ✓ Acts either inappropriately adult or inappropriately infantile.

**➤ Child neglect**

Child neglect—a very common type of child abuse—is a pattern of failing to provide for a child's basic needs, whether it be adequate food, clothing, hygiene, or supervision. Child neglect is not always easy to spot. Sometimes, a parent might become physically or mentally unable to care for a child, such as with a serious injury, untreated depression, or anxiety. Other times, alcohol or drug abuse may seriously impair judgment and the ability to keep a child safe.

Older children might not show outward signs of neglect, becoming used to presenting a competent face to the outside world, and even taking on the role of the parent. But at the end of the day, neglected children are not getting their physical and emotional needs met.

**Warning Signs of Neglect:**

- ✓ Clothes are ill-fitting, filthy, or inappropriate for the weather.
- ✓ Hygiene is consistently bad (unbathed, matted or unwashed hair, noticeable body odor).
- ✓ Untreated illnesses and physical injuries.
- ✓ Is frequently unsupervised or left alone or allowed to play in unsafe situations and environments.
- ✓ Is frequently late or missing from school.

**➤ Physical child abuse**

Physical abuse involves physical harm or injury to the child. It may be the result of a deliberate attempt to hurt the child, but not always. It can also result from severe discipline, such as using a belt on a child, or physical punishment that is inappropriate to the child's age or physical condition.

Many physically abusive parents and caregivers insist that their actions are simply forms of discipline—ways to make children learn to behave. But there is a big difference between using physical punishment to discipline and physical abuse. The point of disciplining children is to teach them right from wrong, not to make them live in fear.

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### **Warning Signs of Physical Abuse:**

- ✓ Frequent injuries or unexplained bruises, welts, or cuts.
- ✓ Is always watchful and “on alert”, as if waiting for something bad to happen
- ✓ Injuries appear to have a pattern such as marks from a hand or belt.
  
- ✓ Shies away from touch, flinches at sudden movements, or seems afraid to go home.
- ✓ Wears inappropriate clothing to cover up injuries, such as long-sleeved shirts on hot days.

### **➤ Sexual child abuse**

Child sexual abuse is an especially complicated form of abuse because of its layers of guilt and shame. It's important to recognize that sexual abuse doesn't always involve body contact. Exposing a child to sexual situations or material is sexually abusive, whether or not touching is involved.

While news stories of sexual predators are scary, what is even more frightening is that sexual abuse usually occurs at the hands of someone the child knows and should be able to trust—most often close relatives. And contrary to what many believe, it's not just girls who are at risk. Boys and girls both suffer from sexual abuse. In fact, sexual abuse of boys may be underreported due to shame and stigma.

### **Warning Signs of Sexual Abuse:**

- ✓ Trouble walking or sitting.
- ✓ Displays knowledge or interest in sexual acts inappropriate to his or her age, or even seductive behavior.
- ✓ Makes strong efforts to avoid a specific person, without an obvious reason.
- ✓ Doesn't want to change clothes in front of others or participate in physical activities.
- ✓ An STD or pregnancy, especially under the age of 14.
- ✓ Runs away from home.

## **Signs and Symptoms of Child Abuse**

- **Changes in mood and behavior.** Abused children can appear more aggressive, scared, anxious, depressed or withdrawn. They may be anxious about leaving school or going places with the abuser.
- **Changes in eating or sleeping.** Stress, fear and anxiety caused by abuse can lead to weight gain or loss, frequent nightmares, difficulty sleeping or extreme fatigue.
- **Changes in school performance and attendance.** Abused children may have difficulty concentrating in school or have excessive absences. A child may also present as an overachiever and possibly be hyper-vigilant about grades or school activities.

- **Lack of personal care or hygiene.** Children may appear uncared for or exhibit poor hygiene as a result of parental neglect or sexual abuse.
- **Risk-taking behaviors.** Young people who are being abused may engage in high-risk activities such as using drugs or alcohol, carrying a weapon or overly sexualized behavior.

If you suspect someone is at risk for child abuse or neglect call the National Child Abuse Hotline at **1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)** or contact Department of Child Services (DCS) at **1-877-54ABUSE (1-877-542-2873)** or **1-877-237-0004**. Someone is available 24/7. Remember, suspicion of abuse is all that is necessary to file a report and your information can be given anonymously. You will be asked to describe your concerns about the child and it will be helpful if you can provide: the child's name, age, address, gender, school attended (if possible), and names of parents.

## Protect a Child

Some signs that a child is experiencing violence or abuse are more obvious than others. Trust your instincts. Suspected abuse is sufficient to contact the authorities. You do not need proof. If you suspect a child has been abused...

### DO:

- Keep calm.
- Tell the child you believe them.
- Show interest and concern.
- Reassure and support the child.
- Take action. It could save a child's life.

### DON'T:

- Panic or overreact.
- Pressure the child.
- Confront the offender.
- Blame the child or minimize the child's feelings.
- Overwhelm the child with questions.

## Myths and facts about child abuse and neglect

### **MYTH #1: It's only abuse if it's violent.**

**Fact:** Physical abuse is just one type of child abuse. Neglect and emotional abuse can be just as damaging, and since they are more subtle, others are less likely to intervene.

### **MYTH #2: Only bad people abuse their children.**

**Fact:** While it's easy to say that only "bad people" abuse their children, it's not always so black and white. Not all abusers are intentionally harming their children. Many have been victims of abuse themselves, and don't know any other way to parent. Others may be struggling with mental health issues or a substance abuse problem.

**MYTH #3: Child abuse doesn't happen in "good" families.**

**Fact:** Child abuse doesn't only happen in poor families or bad neighborhoods. It crosses all racial, economic, and cultural lines. Sometimes, families who seem to have it all from the outside are hiding a different story behind closed doors.

**MYTH #4: Most child abusers are strangers.**

**Fact:** While abuse by strangers does happen, most abusers are family members or others close to the family.

**MYTH #5: Abused children always grow up to be abusers.**

**Fact:** It is true that abused children are more likely to repeat the cycle as adults, unconsciously repeating what they experienced as children. On the other hand, many adult survivors of child abuse have a strong motivation to protect their children against what they went through and become excellent parents.

## Effects of child abuse and neglect

All types of child abuse and neglect leave lasting scars. Some of these scars might be physical, but emotional scarring has long lasting effects throughout life, damaging a child's sense of self, ability to have healthy relationships, and ability to function at home, at work and at school. Some effects include:

- **Lack of trust and relationship difficulties.** If you can't trust your parents, who can you trust? Abuse by a primary caregiver damages the most fundamental relationship as a child—that you will safely, reliably get your physical and emotional needs met by the person who is responsible for your care. Without this base, it is very difficult to learn to trust people or know who is trustworthy. This can lead to difficulty maintaining relationships due to fear of being controlled or abused. It can also lead to unhealthy relationships because the adult doesn't know what a good relationship is.
- **Core feelings of being "worthless" or "damaged."** If you've been told over and over again as a child that you are stupid or no good, it is very difficult to overcome these core feelings. You may experience them as reality. Adults may not strive for more education, or settle for a job that may not pay enough, because they don't believe they can do it or are worth more. Sexual abuse survivors, with the stigma and shame surrounding the abuse, often especially struggle with a feeling of being damaged.
- **Trouble regulating emotions.** Abused children cannot express emotions safely. As a result, the emotions get stuffed down, coming out in unexpected ways. Adult survivors of child abuse can struggle with unexplained anxiety, depression, or anger. They may turn to alcohol or drugs to numb out the painful feelings.

