

# Child Abuse and Neglect

Child abuse and neglect, also known as child maltreatment, refers to any way in which someone harms a child. It also includes neglecting to protect a child from harm or potential harm, or allowing a child to witness violence or abuse that is done to others. Harm to the child may or may not be intended. Abuse often occurs over a long period of time.

Children of abuse often have no one to turn to for help. Children often feel shame about their abuse or fear their abuser. The abuser may have threatened the child with consequences if he or she told anyone about the abuse. Adults who work with children, come into contact with them, or become aware of abuse have the responsibility to protect the children.



If you believe a child is in immediate danger, call your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.).

## What are the different kinds of abuse and neglect?

### Physical abuse

Physical abuse can include:

- Threats with a weapon.
- Throwing objects.
- Pushing.
- Grabbing.
- Hitting.
- Kicking.
- Slapping.
- Shaking.
- Burning.
- Improperly using restraints or medicines.

### Sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse occurs when a person involves a child or adolescent in activity for his or her own sexual pleasure. This includes sexual acts and non-touching sexual behavior between an adult and an adolescent or younger child, or between an older adolescent and a younger child. These activities are abuse, regardless of whether the activity is forced or voluntary.

### Emotional and psychological abuse

Emotional and psychological abuse can include:

- Name calling.
- Rejection.
- Humiliation.
- Intimidation.
- Social isolation.
- Threatening.
- Shaming.
- Withholding love.

## **Neglect**

Neglect is a caregiver's failure to meet the needs of a child. Neglect often overlaps with other kinds of abuse. Neglect can include failure to provide:

- Food.
- Shelter.
- Clothing.
- Means for personal hygiene.
- Medical and dental care.
- Education.
- Supervision.
- Social stimulation.

## **How do I know if a child is being abused or neglected?**

There are a variety of signs that a child may be going through abuse or neglect.

### **Physical signs**

A child may be abused or neglected if the child has:

- Burns.
- Scars.
- Bruises.
- Bites.
- Broken bones.
- Sores.
- Rashes.
- Weight loss.
- Bleeding.
- Injury to the genitals.

Often, the child may not have an explanation for the physical signs, or the explanation will change.

### **Behavioral signs**

Child abuse and neglect can be difficult to detect. Sometimes children show very few signs. A child may be going through abuse or neglect if he or she:

- Seems afraid of a caregiver or other adults.
- Withdraws socially or becomes unusually affectionate.
- Seems depressed.
- Has nightmares or difficulty sleeping.
- Tries to run away.
- Reverts to young child behaviors. This may include bed-wetting or thumb-sucking.
- Develops a sudden change in appetite.
- Thinks he or she has imaginary illnesses (*hypochondria*).
- Shows signs of hostility toward people or animals.
- Develops destructive or self-destructive behavior.
- Shows emotional extremes. This can include:
  - Excessive crying or no crying.
  - Very aggressive or very passive behavior.
  - Being highly fearful or fearless.

- Has unexplained abdominal pain or headaches.
- Frequent absences or poor performance in school.
- Acts sexually mature in a way that is not reflective of the child's age.
- Has a noticeable change in confidence.
- Has little interest in recreational activities.
- Abuses alcohol or drugs.

Additionally, the child may:

- Be very hungry.
- Have poor hygiene.
- Wear clothing that is not appropriate for the weather.
- Seem to have little or no adult supervision.
- Stop developing at a normal weight and height.
- Not have necessary medical supplies.

### **What should I do if I think a child is being abused or neglected?**

**If you believe a child is in immediate danger, call your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.).**

If a child is being abused or neglected, contact:

- Child Protective Services (CPS) in the U.S. This state agency is usually part of social services or a department of human services (sometimes referred to as Department of Children and Families, or DCF).
- A health care provider. Doctors, nurses, and other health care providers are required to report abuse or neglect and can make sure the child is healthy and safe. You can take the child to a local emergency department if you do not know where to go.
- The police. Report your concerns to the local police station.
- The 24-hour Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453.

When abuse is reported:

- The child is not always removed immediately from the home. In fact, CPS works to keep families together and to provide support for preventing abuse and strengthening the families whenever possible.
- The report can be anonymous. In most states, you do not need to provide your name.
- The report is confidential. The abuser is not entitled to know who reported him or her.

### **What are the treatment or care options for a child who is abused or neglected?**

Treatment depends on the type of abuse or neglect. It usually involves the child and the family. The first step is to provide a safe environment and prevent further harm to the child. Treatment may include:

- Medical treatment. Injuries from abuse or neglect may require medical attention.
- Counseling and therapy.
- Treatment teams. This often includes health professionals, social workers, mental health specialists, lawyers, and community workers.
- Parenting classes and information on child development.

## Where can I get more information?

- Child Welfare Information Gateway: [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)
- Prevent Child Abuse America: [preventchildabuse.org](http://preventchildabuse.org)
- Childhelp: [www.childhelp.org](http://www.childhelp.org)
- Your local health department, medical center, hospital, or other social service providers. They can refer you to an organization that provides specific services to help.

## Summary

- Child abuse and neglect, also called child maltreatment, can have lasting negative consequences for children's health and well-being.
- There are many signs of child abuse, including scars, broken bones, bruises, weight loss, and withdrawal from regular activities.
- Report abuse to child protective services, local law enforcement, doctors, nurses, or social workers.
- If you believe a child is in immediate danger, call your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.).

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.