

Child Abuse and Neglect

What is child abuse?

Child abuse is anything done by a person that causes serious risk or harm to a child. Abuse may be physical, emotional, or sexual.

Physical abuse is an injury to a child's body. Even though the child is not hurt on purpose, it may still be considered child abuse. Abuse may include kicking, shaking, biting, throwing, stabbing, and choking. It may also include beating a child with objects such as a belt or paddle or purposely burning a child with hot water, cigarettes, or a stove.

Sexual abuse may include physical touch, intercourse or oral sex, or showing genitals to a child. It may also include showing sexual pictures to a child or taking pictures of a child without clothes or while performing sex acts. Any sexual activity, even if the child agrees, between a child and an adult may be sexual abuse. The intent to use children to create sexual arousal is illegal.

Emotional abuse includes things that can damage a child's emotional development or self-worth. This may include verbal abuse such as making fun of the child, blaming them for things that are not their fault, or swearing at them. It may also include cruel punishments, such as locking children in a closet or threatening to abandon them if they do not behave.

What is child neglect?

Neglect is when the caregiver does not give the child the things needed for his or her health. This may include physical, emotional, or educational needs. Different kinds of abuse and neglect can happen at the same time.

Child neglect occurs when children are not provided a safe home, proper clothing, healthy food, schooling or medical care.

Signs of neglect may be subtle. A child may be hungry and be very thin, be poorly groomed, or smell bad due to poor hygiene.

What are signs of child abuse?

Not all abused children have the same symptoms. Signs of physical abuse may include:

- bruises on the buttocks or genitals
- burns, including cigarette burns, on the body
- many broken bones at different stages of healing or certain types of broken bone that are hard to get by accident
- eye, ear, head, and stomach injuries.

Children who have been abused may be nervous around adults, or be very aggressive toward adults or children. They may also have a sudden change in their activities or personality.

Signs of sexual abuse may not be easy to see. There may not be any injuries seen with sexual abuse, or there may be injuries to the bottom or genitals of the child. The child may not tell anyone what has happened, because the abuser threatened the child or told them to keep it secret.

What increases the risk of abuse?

A child under one year of age is at greatest risk for harm from child abuse. Abuse is most

Child Abuse and Neglect

likely when:

- Children have physical or mental disabilities.
- Children have personality or behavioral problems.
- Caregivers are angry, unhappy, or expect too much from the child.
- Caregivers were themselves abused as children.
- Caregivers use drugs or alcohol, or are depressed, anxious, or have poor impulse control.
- Caregivers who cannot stand being frustrated.
- Caregivers who are unemployed, homeless, or living in poverty.

What if I think a child might be abused?

Child abuse cannot be allowed. Parents and caregivers need to know who to call for help. Parenting classes, support groups, and day care are available through many state social service agencies and private child welfare programs. Many states and cities have hotlines parents can call when they feel that they might abuse a child.

People who might abuse children can get help from:

- Hospitals, community centers, and clinics that offer classes on parenting, discipline, and stress management.
- Social services departments that have parenting classes and community referrals to help with finances and other things that can cause stress.
- Healthcare providers who can provide information and referrals.
- Mental health professionals who can provide counseling and parenting classes.

All states require healthcare providers to report suspected child abuse. The goals of child protection teams are to stop the abuse and help the family become safe for the children. Sometimes children need to be put in a foster family for a while. Counseling is usually needed for the abuser. Usually the child will need counseling too.

If you suspect that a child is being abused or neglected, take action right away. Do not wait until you are sure that abuse is occurring. This delay may put the child's life in danger.

Written by Pamela Daniel, PhD.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.