

FAQ's About Child Abuse

Recognizing Child Abuse and Neglect: Signs and Symptoms

Based on information from the Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2006; www.childwelfare.gov

Q. How does someone recognize signs of abuse and neglect?

- A.** The first step in helping abused or neglected children is learning to recognize the signs of child abuse and neglect. The presence of a single sign does not prove child abuse is occurring; however, when these signs appear repeatedly or in combination you should take a closer look at the situation and consider the possibility of child abuse. If you do suspect a child is being harmed, reporting your suspicions may protect the child and get help for the family. Contact your local child protective services agency or police department. For more information about where and how to file a report, call the Childhelp® National Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-4ACHILD or 1-800-422-4453s).

Recognizing Child Abuse and/or Neglect

The following signs may signal the presence of child abuse or neglect.

The Child:

- Shows sudden changes in behavior or school performance.
- Has not received help for physical or medical problems brought to the parents' attention.
- Has learning problems (or difficulty concentrating) that cannot be attributed to specific physical or psychological causes.
- Is always watchful, as though preparing for something bad to happen.
- Lacks adult supervision.
- Is overly compliant, passive, or withdrawn.
- Comes to school or other activities early, stays late, and does not want to go home.

The Parent:

- Shows little concern for the child.
- Denies the existence of—or blames the child for—the child's problems in school or at home.
- Asks teachers or other caretakers to use harsh physical discipline if the child misbehaves.
- Sees the child as entirely bad, worthless, or burdensome.
- Demands a level of physical or academic performance the child cannot achieve.
- Looks primarily to the child for care, attention, and satisfaction of emotional needs.

The Parent and Child:

- Rarely touch or look at each other.
- Consider their relationship entirely negative.
- State that they do not like each other.

Q. What are the Types and Signs of Abuse and Neglect?

A. The following are some signs often associated with particular types of child abuse and neglect: physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. It is important to note, however, these types of abuse are more typically found in combination than alone. A physically abused child, for example, is often emotionally abused as well, and a sexually abused child also may be neglected.

Signs of Physical Abuse

Consider the possibility of physical abuse when the **child**:

- Has unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, or black eyes.
- Has fading bruises or other marks noticeable after an absence from school or activities
- Seems frightened of the parents and protests or cries when it is time to go home.
- Shrinks at the approach of adults.
- Reports injury by a parent or another adult caregiver.

Consider the possibility of physical abuse when the **parent or other adult caregiver**:

- Offers conflicting, unconvincing, or no explanation for the child's injury.
- Describes the child as "evil," or in some other very negative way.
- Uses harsh physical discipline with the child.
- Has a history of abuse as a child.

Signs of Neglect

Consider the possibility of neglect when the **child**:

- Is frequently absent from school or activities.
- Begg or steals food or money.
- Lacks needed medical or dental care, immunizations, or glasses.
- Is consistently dirty and has severe body odor.
- Lacks sufficient clothing for the weather.
- Abuses alcohol or other drugs.
- States that there is no one at home to provide care.

Consider the possibility of neglect when the **parent or other adult caregiver**:

- Appears to be indifferent to the child.
- Seems apathetic or depressed.
- Behaves irrationally or in a bizarre manner.
- Is abusing alcohol or other drugs.

Signs of Sexual Abuse

Consider the possibility of sexual abuse when the **child**:

- Has difficulty walking or sitting.
- Suddenly refuses to change for gym or to participate in physical activities.
- Reports nightmares or bed wetting.
- Experiences a sudden change in appetite.
- Demonstrates bizarre, sophisticated, or unusual sexual knowledge or behavior.
- Becomes pregnant or contracts a venereal disease, particularly if under age 14.
- Runs away.
- Reports sexual abuse by a parent or another adult caregiver.

Consider the possibility of sexual abuse when the **parent or other adult caregiver**:

- Is unduly protective of the child or severely limits the child's contact with other children, especially of the opposite sex.
- Is secretive and isolated.
- Is jealous or controlling with family members.

Signs of Emotional Maltreatment

Consider the possibility of emotional maltreatment when the **child**:

- Shows extremes in behavior, such as overly compliant or demanding behavior, extreme passivity, or aggression.
- Is either inappropriately adult (parenting other children, for example) or inappropriately infantile (frequently rocking or head-banging, for example).
- Is delayed in physical or emotional development.
- Has attempted suicide.
- Reports a lack of attachment to the parent.

Consider the possibility of emotional maltreatment when the **parent or other adult caregiver**:

- Constantly blames, belittles, or berates the child.
- Is unconcerned about the child and refuses to consider offers of help for the child's problems.
- Overtly rejects the child.

Q. Who are the perpetrators of child abuse and neglect? Who typically abuses and neglects children?

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families;
www.afc.hhs.gov

- A.** Most States define perpetrators of child abuse and neglect as parents and “other caretakers” (such as relatives, babysitters, and foster parents) who have harmed a child in their care. It is important to note that States define the term “caretaker” differently. Harm caused to a child by others (such as acquaintances or strangers) may not be considered “child abuse” but rather may be considered a criminal matter.

According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System’s most current report, Child Maltreatment 2005, of the approximately 899,000 child abuse and neglect victims in 2005, the largest percentage of perpetrators (79.4 percent) were parents, including birth parents, adoptive parents, and stepparents. Other relatives accounted for an additional 6.8 percent, residential staff for 0.2 percent, and daycare providers for 0.6 percent. Unmarried partners of parents accounted for 3.8 percent of perpetrators while foster parent accounted for 0.5 percent of perpetrators.

In 2005, 57.8 percent of child abuse and neglect perpetrators were females and 42.2 percent were males. For the most part, female perpetrators were younger than male perpetrators; of the women who were perpetrators, 45.3 percent of females were younger than 30 years of age as compared to 34.7 percent of males.

Q. What can I do if I suspect child abuse or neglect? How do I report child abuse or neglect?

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families;
www.afc.hhs.gov

- A.** All States have a system to receive and respond to reports of suspected child abuse and neglect. If you suspect a child is being harmed, you should report your concerns to the appropriate authorities, such as child protective services (CPS), in the State where the child resides. Each State has trained professionals who can evaluate the situation and determine whether intervention and services are needed. Most States have a toll-free number to call to report suspected child abuse and neglect. Please refer to the related organizations listing at http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp.cfm?rs_id=5&rate_chno=11-11172 for information about where to call to make a report in your State.

Another resource for information about how and where to file a report of suspected child abuse or neglect is the Childhelp® National Child Abuse Hotline. Childhelp® can be reached 7 days a week, 24-hours a day, at its toll-free number, 1-800-4ACHILD® (1.800.422.4453).