

Child Abuse and Neglect

How to Spot the Signs and Make a Difference



Child abuse encompasses 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 on kids. The earlier abused children get help, the greater chance they have to heal and break the cycle—rather than perpetuate it. By learning about common signs of abuse and how you can intervene, you might make a huge difference in a child's life.

What is child abuse and neglect?

Child abuse isn't just about black eyes. While physical abuse is shocking due to the marks it leaves, not all signs of child abuse are as obvious. Ignoring children's needs, putting them in unsupervised, dangerous situations, exposing them to sexual situations, or making them feel worthless or stupid are also forms of child abuse and neglect. Regardless of the type of abuse, the result is serious emotional harm. But there is help available. If you suspect a child is suffering from abuse or neglect, it's important to speak out. By catching the problem as early as possible, both the child and the abuser can get the help they need. To start, it's important to separate the myths from the facts about child abuse and neglect:

Myths and facts about child abuse and neglect

Myth: It's only abuse if it's violent.

Fact: Physical abuse is just one type of child abuse. Child neglect, sexual and emotional abuse can inflict just as much damage, and since they're not always as obvious, others are less likely to intervene.

Myths and facts about child abuse and neglect

Myth: Only bad people abuse their children.

Fact: Not all abusive parents or guardians intentionally harm 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 substance abuse problems.

Myth: Abuse doesn't happen in "good" families.

Fact: Abuse and neglect doesn't only happen in poor families or bad neighborhoods. These behaviors cross 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: Most child abusers are strangers.

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

Myth: 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 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, their future relationships, and ability to function at home, work and school. Effects include:

Lack of trust and relationship difficulties. If you can't trust your parents, who can you trust? Without this base, it is very difficult to learn to trust people or know who is trustworthy. This can lead to difficulty maintaining relationships in adulthood. It can also lead to unhealthy relationships because the adult doesn't know what a good relationship is.

Core feelings of being "worthless." 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. As they grow up, abused kids may neglect their education or settle for low-paying jobs because they don't believe they are worth more. Sexual abuse survivors, with the stigma and shame surrounding the abuse, often 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.

Recognizing the different types of child abuse

Abusive behavior comes in many forms, but the common denominator is the emotional effect on the child. Whether the abuse is a slap, a harsh comment, stony silence, or not knowing if there will be dinner on the table, the end result is a child that feels unsafe, uncared for, and alone.

Emotional abuse. Contrary to some people's beliefs, words can hurt and emotional abuse can severely damage a child's mental health or social development. Examples of emotional abuse include:

- Constant belittling, shaming, and humiliating
- Calling names and making negative comparisons to others
- Telling a child they're "no good," "worthless," "bad," or "a mistake"
- Frequent yelling, threatening, or bullying
- Ignoring or rejecting a child as punishment, giving them the silent treatment
- Limiting physical contact with a child—no hugs, kisses, or other signs of affection
- Exposing a child to violence against others, whether it is against the other parent, a sibling, or even a pet

Child neglect—a very common type of child abuse—is a pattern of failing to provide for a child's basic needs, which include 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 in cases of serious illness or injury, or untreated depression or anxiety. Other times, alcohol or drug abuse may seriously impair judgment and the ability to keep a child safe.

Physical abuse involves physical harm or injury to the child. It may be the result of a deliberate attempt to hurt the child or excessive physical punishment. Many physically abusive parents 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.

With physical abuse, the following elements are present:

- **Unpredictability.** The child never knows what is going to set the parent off. There are no clear boundaries or rules. The child is constantly walking on eggshells, never sure what behavior will trigger a physical assault.
- **Lashing out in anger.** Abusive parents act out of anger and the desire to assert control, not the motivation to lovingly teach the child. The angrier the parent, the more intense the abuse.
- **Using fear to control behavior.** Abusive parents may believe that their children need to

fear them in order to behave, so they use physical abuse to “keep their child in line.” However, what children are really learning is how to avoid being hit, not how to behave or grow as individuals.

Sexual 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.

- Sexually abused children are often tormented by shame and guilt. They may feel that they are responsible for the abuse or somehow brought it upon themselves. This can lead to self-loathing and sexual and relationship problems as they grow older.
- The shame of sexual abuse makes it very difficult for children to come forward. They may worry that others won’t believe them, will be angry with them, or that it will split their family apart. Because of these difficulties, false accusations of sexual abuse are not common, so if a child confides in you, take them seriously.

Warning signs of child abuse and neglect

Warning signs of emotional abuse:

- Excessively withdrawn, fearful, or anxious about doing something wrong
- Shows extremes in behavior (extremely compliant, demanding, passive, aggressive)
- Doesn’t seem to be attached to the parent or caregiver
- Acts either inappropriately adult (taking care of other children) or inappropriately infantile (thumb-sucking, throwing tantrums)

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

Warning signs of child neglect:

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

- Is frequently late or missing from school

Warning signs of sexual abuse in children:

- Trouble walking or sitting
- Displays knowledge of sexual acts inappropriate for their 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

Risk factors for child abuse and neglect

While abuse and neglect occurs in all types of families, children are at a much greater risk in certain situations.

Domestic violence. Even if the abused parent does their best to protect their children, [domestic violence](#) is still extremely damaging. Getting out is the best way to help your children.

Alcohol and drug abuse. Parents who are [drunk or high](#) may be unable to care for their children, make good parenting decisions, or control often-dangerous impulses. Substance abuse can also lead to physical abuse.

Untreated mental illness. Parents who are suffering from [depression](#), an [anxiety disorder](#), [bipolar disorder](#), or another mental illness may have trouble taking care of themselves, much less their children. A mentally ill or traumatized parent may be distant and withdrawn from their children, or quick to anger without understanding why. Treatment for the caregiver means better care for the children.

Lack of parenting skills. Some caregivers never learned the skills necessary for good parenting. Teen parents, for example, might have unrealistic expectations about how much care babies and small children need. Or parents who were themselves victims of child abuse may only know how to raise their children the way they were raised. Parenting classes, therapy, and caregiver support groups are great resources for learning better parenting skills.

Stress and lack of support. Parenting can be a very time-intensive, [stressful job](#), especially if you're raising children without support from family and friends, or you're dealing with relationship problems or financial difficulties. Caring for a child with a disability, special needs, or difficult behaviors is also a challenge. It's important to get the support you need, so you are emotionally and physically able to support your child.

Recognizing abusive behavior in yourself

Raising children is one of life's greatest challenges and can trigger anger and frustration in the most even-tempered parent or guardian. If you grew up in a household where screaming and shouting or violence was the norm, you may not know any other way to raise your kids.

Recognizing that you have a problem is the biggest step to getting help. The following are warning signs that you may be crossing the line into abuse:

You can't stop your anger. What starts as a swat on the backside may turn into multiple hits getting harder and harder. You may shake your child more and more and finally throw them down. You find yourself screaming louder and louder and can't stop yourself.

You feel emotionally disconnected from your child. You may feel so overwhelmed that you don't want anything to do with your child. You just want to be left alone and for your child to be quiet.

Meeting the daily needs of your child seems impossible. While everyone struggles with balancing dressing, feeding, and getting kids to school or other activities, if you continually can't manage to do it, it's a sign that something might be wrong.

Other people have expressed concern. It may be easy to bristle at other people expressing concern. However, consider carefully what they have to say. Are the words coming from someone you normally respect and trust?

Breaking the cycle of abuse

If you have a history of child abuse, having your own children can trigger strong memories and feelings that you may have repressed. You may be shocked and [overwhelmed by your anger](#), and feel like you can't control it. But you can learn new ways to manage your emotions and break your old patterns.

Remember, you are the most important person in your child's world - and you don't have to go it alone. Help and support are available:

Learn what is age appropriate and what is not. Having realistic expectations of what children can handle at certain ages will help you avoid frustration and anger at normal child behavior. For example, newborns are not going to sleep through the night without a peep, and toddlers are not going to be able to sit quietly for extended periods of time.

Develop new parenting skills. Start by learning appropriate discipline techniques and how to set clear boundaries for your children. Parenting classes, books, and seminars offer

this information. You can also turn to other parents for tips and advice.

Take care of yourself. If you are [not getting enough rest](#) and support or you're feeling overwhelmed, you are much more likely to succumb to anger. Sleep deprivation, common in parents of young children, adds to moodiness and irritability—exactly what you are trying to avoid.

Get professional help. Breaking the cycle of abuse can be very difficult if the patterns are strongly entrenched. If you can't seem to stop yourself no matter how hard you try, it's time to get help, whether in the form of [therapy](#), parenting classes, or other interventions. Your children will thank you for it.

Learn to control your emotions. If you were abused or neglected as a child, you may have an especially difficult time getting in touch with your range of emotions. You may have had to deny or repress them as a child, and now they spill out without your control. HelpGuide's free [Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](#) can help.

How to help an abused or neglected child

What should you do if you suspect that a child is being abused? Or if a child confides in you? It's normal to feel a little overwhelmed and confused. Child abuse is a difficult subject that can be hard to accept and even harder to talk about—for both you and the child. When talking with an abused child, the best way to encourage them is to show calm reassurance and unconditional support. If you're having trouble finding the words, let your actions speak for you.

Avoid denial and remain calm. A common reaction to news as unpleasant and shocking as child abuse is denial. However, if you display denial to a child, or show shock or disgust at what they are saying, the child may be afraid to continue and will shut down. As hard as it may be, remain as calm and reassuring as you can.

Don't interrogate. Let the child explain to you in their own words what happened, but don't interrogate the child or ask leading questions. This may confuse and fluster the child and make it harder for them to continue their story.

Reassure the child that they did nothing wrong. It takes a lot for a child to come forward about abuse. Reassure them that you take what they said seriously, and that it is not their fault.

Safety comes first. If you feel that your safety or the safety of the child would be threatened if you tried to intervene, leave it to the professionals. You may be able to provide more support later.

Reporting child abuse or neglect

If you suspect that a child is undergoing abuse, it's critical to report it—and to continue reporting each separate incidence if it continues to recur. Each report you make is a snapshot of what's going on in the family. The more information you can provide, the better the chance of the child getting the help they deserve. Of course, it's normal to have some reservations or worries about reporting child abuse.

I don't want to interfere in someone else's family. Child abuse and neglect is NOT merely a family matter, and the consequences of staying silent can be devastating for the child.

What if I break up someone's home? A child abuse report does not mean a child is automatically removed from the home—unless they're clearly in danger. Parents may be first offered support, such as parenting classes or anger management counseling.

They will know it was me who called. Reporting is anonymous. In most places, you do not have to give your name when you report child abuse.

What I have to say won't make a difference. If you have a gut feeling that something is wrong, it's better to be safe than sorry. Even if you can't see the whole picture, others may have noticed signs as well, and a pattern can help identify child abuse that might have otherwise been overlooked.

Where to turn for help

Child abuse hotlines:

- **In the U.S. or Canada:** Call [Childhelp](#) at 1-800-422-4453 or visit [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)
- **UK:** Call [NSPCC Childline](#) at 0800 1111
- **Australia:** Visit [CAPS](#) for a hotline in your state
- **New Zealand:** Call [Kidsline](#) at 0800 54 37 54
- **Other international helplines:** Visit [Child Helpline International](#)

Recommended reading

[Recognizing Child Abuse: What Parents Should Know](#) (PDF) - Signs and symptoms of child abuse in children *and their parents*. (Prevent Child Abuse America)

[Abusive Head Trauma \(Shaken Baby Syndrome\)](#) - Signs and symptoms, and strategies for

HelpGuide

soothing a baby before the caregiver's frustration mounts. (Nemours Foundation)

[Prevent Child Sexual Abuse](#) (PDF) - Warning signs of sexual abuse in children and in their adult abusers. (Stop It Now!)

[Emotional Abuse](#) - Recognizing and responding to emotional child abuse. (NSPCC)

[Child Neglect: A Guide for Prevention, Assessment, and Intervention](#) (PDF) - Recognizing and reporting child neglect. (Child Welfare Information Gateway)

[What to Do if a Child Speaks Out About Abuse](#) - What to do if either a child or a caregiver approaches you about abuse. (NSPCC)

[How the Child Welfare System Works](#) - Services available in the U.S. and how to report suspected abuse or neglect. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)

Authors: Melinda Smith, M.A., Lawrence Robinson, and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D. Last updated: November 2018.