

What is Child Abuse and Neglect?

How Is Child Abuse and Neglect Defined in Federal Law?

Federal legislation provides a foundation for States by identifying a minimum set of acts or behaviors that define child abuse and neglect. The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), (42 U.S.C.A. §5106g), as amended by the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003, defines child abuse and neglect as, at minimum:

Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or An act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm.

What Are the Major Types of Child Abuse and Neglect?

Within the minimum standards set by CAPTA, each State is responsible for providing its own definitions of child abuse and neglect.¹ Most States recognize four major types of maltreatment: neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. Although any of the forms of child maltreatment may be found separately, they often occur in combination.

The examples provided below are for general informational purposes only. Not all States' definitions will include all of the examples listed below, and individual States' definitions may cover additional situations not mentioned here.

Neglect is failure to provide for a child's basic needs. Neglect may be:

Physical (e.g., failure to provide necessary food or shelter, or lack of appropriate supervision)

Medical (e.g., failure to provide necessary medical or mental health treatment)²

Educational (e.g., failure to educate a child or attend to special education needs)

Emotional (e.g., inattention to a child's emotional needs, failure to provide psychological care, or permitting the child to use alcohol or other drugs)

These situations do not always mean a child is neglected. Sometimes cultural values, the standards of care in the community, and poverty may be contributing factors, indicating the family is in need of information or assistance. When a family fails to use information and resources, and the child's health or safety is at risk, then child welfare intervention may be required.

Physical abuse is physical injury (ranging from minor bruises to severe fractures or death) as a result of punching, beating, kicking, biting, shaking, throwing, stabbing, choking, hitting (with a hand, stick, strap, or other object), burning, or otherwise harming a child. Such injury is considered abuse regardless of whether the caretaker intended to hurt the child.

Sexual abuse includes activities by a parent or caretaker such as fondling a child's genitals, penetration, incest, rape, sodomy, indecent exposure, and exploitation through prostitution or the production of pornographic materials.

Sexual abuse is defined by CAPTA as "the employment, use, persuasion, inducement, enticement, or coercion of any child to engage in, or assist any other person to engage in, any sexually explicit conduct or simulation of such conduct for the purpose of producing a visual depiction of such conduct; or the rape, and in cases of caretaker or inter-familial relationships, statutory rape, molestation, prostitution, or other form of sexual exploitation of children, or incest with children."

Emotional abuse is a pattern of behavior that impairs a child's emotional development or sense of self-worth. This may include constant criticism, threats, or rejection, as well as withholding love, support, or guidance. Emotional abuse is often difficult to prove and, therefore, CPS may not be able to intervene without evidence of harm to the child. Emotional abuse is almost always present when other forms are identified.

Recognizing Child Abuse and Neglect: Signs and Symptoms

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 in a family; 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, report your suspicions to your immediate supervisor.

Recognizing Child Abuse

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.

Types of Abuse

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.
- 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.
- Begs 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.

Physical and Behavioral Indicators of Abuse

Type of Abuse	Physical Indicators	Behavioral Indicators
Physical Abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unexplained bruises (in various stages of healing) Unexplained burns, especially cigarette burns or immersion burns Unexplained fractures, lacerations or abrasions Swollen areas Evidence of delayed or inappropriate treatment for injuries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self destructive Withdrawn and/or aggressive - behavioral extremes Arrives at school early or stays late as if afraid to be at home Chronic runaway (adolescents) Complains of soreness or moves uncomfortably

		<p>Wears clothing inappropriate to weather, to cover body</p> <p>Bizarre explanation of injuries</p> <p>Wary of adult contact</p>
Physical Neglect	<p>Abandonment</p> <p>Unattended medical needs</p> <p>Consistent lack of supervision</p> <p>Consistent hunger, inappropriate dress, poor hygiene</p> <p>Lice, distended stomach, emaciated</p> <p>Inadequate nutrition</p>	<p>Regularly displays fatigue or listlessness, falls asleep in class</p> <p>Steals food, begs from classmates</p> <p>Reports that no caretaker is at home</p> <p>Frequently absent or tardy</p> <p>Self destructive</p> <p>School dropout (adolescents)</p> <p>Extreme loneliness and need for affection</p>
Sexual Abuse	<p>Sexual abuse may be non-touching: obscene language, pornography, exposure - or touching: fondling, molesting, oral sex, intercourse</p> <p>Torn, stained or bloody underclothing</p> <p>Pain, swelling or itching in genital area</p> <p>Difficulty walking or sitting</p> <p>Bruises or bleeding in genital area</p>	<p>Excessive seductiveness</p> <p>Role reversal, overly concerned for siblings</p> <p>Massive weight change</p> <p>Suicide attempts (especially adolescents)</p> <p>Inappropriate sex play or premature understanding of sex</p>

	Venereal disease Frequent urinary or yeast infections	Threatened by physical contact, closeness
Emotional Abuse	Emotional abuse may be name-calling, insults, put-downs, etc., or it may be terrorization, isolation, humiliation, rejection, corruption, ignoring Speech disorders Delayed physical development Substance abuse Ulcers, asthma, severe allergies	Habit disorder (sucking, rocking, biting) Antisocial, destructive Neurotic traits (sleep disorders, inhibition of play) Passive and aggressive - behavioral extremes Delinquent behavior (especially adolescents) Developmentally delayed

Remember:

DISCIPLINE helps a child learn a lesson that will carry over and positively affect future behavior. **ABUSE** affects the future in a negative way, leading to anger, hatred and more deviant behavior.

DISCIPLINE enhances the child's sense of self worth, helping the child learn self-control and thus becoming comfortable within the family and in society. **ABUSE** robs the child of self worth and causes him/her to feel outcast and resentful.

DISCIPLINE is not shame or guilt. **ABUSE** is shame or guilt which satisfies the needs of certain individuals at the moment and destroys the self image of the child in a hostile manner.

DISCIPLINE is taught by example. But so is **Abuse!**
 Adapted from Child Discipline: Guidelines for Parents



