Child Welfare Information Gateway

PROTECTING CHILDREN ■ STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

FACTSHEET

July 2013

Disponible en español
https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/ques.cfm

What Is Child Abuse and Neglect? Recognizing the 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 mean that child maltreatment is occurring in a family, but a closer look at the situation may be warranted when these signs appear repeatedly or in combination. This factsheet is intended to help you better understand the legal definition of child abuse and neglect, learn about the different types

What's Inside:

- How is child abuse and neglect defined in Federal law?
- What are the major types of child abuse and neglect?
- Recognizing signs of abuse and neglect
- Resources

Use your smartphone to access this factsheet online.

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of abuse and neglect, and recognize the signs and symptoms of abuse and neglect. Resources about the impact of trauma on well-being also are included in this factsheet.

How Is Child Abuse and Neglect Defined in Federal Law?

Federal legislation lays the groundwork for State laws on child maltreatment 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 and reauthorized by the CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010, 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."

Most Federal and State child protection laws primarily refer to cases of harm to a child caused by parents or other caregivers; they generally do not include harm caused by other people, such as acquaintances or strangers. Some State laws also include a child's witnessing of domestic violence as a form of abuse or neglect.

CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT STATISTICS

- *Child Maltreatment*
  This report summarizes annual child abuse statistics submitted by States to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). It includes information about child maltreatment reports, victims, fatalities, perpetrators, services, and additional research: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/child-maltreatment
- Child Welfare Outcomes Report Data
  This website provides information on the performance of States in seven outcome categories related to the safety, permanency, and well-being of children involved in the child welfare system. Data, which are made available on the website prior to the release of the annual report, include the number of child victims of maltreatment: http://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/data/overview

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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. Most States recognize the four major types of maltreatment: physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. Signs and symptoms for each type of maltreatment are listed below. Additionally, many States identify abandonment and parental substance abuse as abuse or neglect. While these types of maltreatment may be found separately, they often occur in combination. For State-specific laws pertaining to child abuse and neglect, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's State Statutes Search page: https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/

Information Gateway's *Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect* provides civil definitions that determine the grounds for intervention by State child protective agencies: https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/define.pdf

Physical abuse is nonaccidental 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, that is inflicted by a parent, caregiver, or other person who has responsibility for the child.[1] Such injury is considered abuse regardless of whether the caregiver intended to hurt the child. Physical discipline, such as spanking or paddling, is not considered abuse as long as it is reasonable and causes no bodily injury to the child.

Neglect is the failure of a parent, guardian, or other caregiver 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)

Sometimes cultural values, the standards of care in the community, and poverty may contribute to maltreatment, indicating

[1] Nonaccidental injury that is inflicted by someone other than a parent, guardian, relative, or other caregiver (i.e., a stranger), is considered a criminal act that is not addressed by child protective services.

[2] *Withholding of medically indicated treatment* is a specific form of medical neglect that is defined by CAPTA as "the failure to respond to the infant's life-threatening conditions by providing treatment (including appropriate nutrition, hydration, and medication) which, in the treating physician's or physicians' reasonable medical judgment, will be most likely to be effective in ameliorating or correcting all such conditions..." CAPTA does note a few exceptions, including infants who are "chronically and irreversibly comatose"; situations when providing treatment would not save the infant's life but merely prolong dying; or when "the provision of such treatment would be virtually futile in terms of the survival of the infant and the treatment itself under such circumstances would be inhumane."

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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. In addition, many States provide an exception to the definition of neglect for parents who choose not to seek medical care for their children due to religious beliefs.[3]

Sexual abuse includes activities by a parent or caregiver 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 (or psychological 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, child protective services may not be able to intervene without evidence of harm or mental injury to the child. Emotional abuse is almost always present when other types of maltreatment are identified.

Abandonment is now defined in many States as a form of neglect. In general, a child is considered to be abandoned when the parent's identity or whereabouts are unknown, the child has been left alone in circumstances where the child suffers serious harm, or the parent has failed to maintain contact with the child or provide reasonable support for a specified period of time. Some States have enacted laws—often called safe haven laws—that provide safe places for parents to relinquish newborn infants. Child Welfare Information Gateway produced a publication as part of its State Statute series that summarizes such State laws. *Infant Safe Haven Laws* is available on the Information Gateway website: https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/safehaven.cfm

Substance abuse is an element of the definition of child abuse or neglect in many States. Circumstances that are considered abuse or neglect in some States include the following:

- Prenatal exposure of a child to harm due to the mother's use of an illegal drug or other substance
- Manufacture of methamphetamine in the presence of a child
- Selling, distributing, or giving illegal drugs or alcohol to a child
- Use of a controlled substance by a caregiver that impairs the caregiver's ability to adequately care for the child

[3] The CAPTA amendments of 1996 (42 U.S.C.A. § 5106i) added new provisions specifying that nothing in the act be construed as establishing a Federal requirement that a parent or legal guardian provide any medical service or treatment that is against the religious beliefs of the parent or legal guardian.

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For more information about this issue, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's *Parental Drug Use as Child Abuse* at https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/drugexposed.cfm

Recognizing Signs of Abuse and Neglect

In addition to working to prevent a child from experiencing abuse or neglect, it is important to recognize high-risk situations and the signs and symptoms of maltreatment. If you do suspect a child is being harmed, reporting your suspicions may protect him or her and get help for the family. Any concerned person can report suspicions of child abuse or neglect. Reporting your concerns is not making an accusation; rather, it is a request for an investigation and assessment to determine if help is needed.

Some people (typically certain types of professionals, such as teachers or physicians) are required by State law to make a report of child maltreatment under specific circumstances—these are called mandatory reporters. Some States require all adults to report suspicions of child abuse or neglect. Child Welfare Information Gateway's publication *Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect* discusses the laws that designate groups of professionals as mandatory reporters: https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/manda.cfm

For information about where and how to file a report, contact your local child protective services agency or police department.

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline (800.4.A.CHILD) and its website offer crisis intervention, information, resources, and referrals to support services and provide assistance in 170 languages: http://www.childhelp.org/pages/hotline-home

For information on what happens when suspected abuse or neglect is reported, read Information Gateway's *How the Child Welfare System Works*: https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/cpswork.pdf

Some children may directly disclose that they have experienced abuse or neglect. The factsheet *How to Handle Child Abuse Disclosures*, produced by the "Childhelp Speak Up Be Safe" child abuse prevention campaign, offers tips. The factsheet defines direct and indirect disclosure, as well as tips for supporting the child: http://www.speakupbesafe.org/parents/disclosures-for-parents.pdf

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

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- Is overly compliant, passive, or withdrawn
- Comes to school or other activities early, stays late, and does not want to go home
- Is reluctant to be around a particular person
- Discloses maltreatment

The Parent:

- Denies the existence of—or blames the child for—the child's problems in school or at home
- Asks teachers or other caregivers 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 the parent's emotional needs
- Shows little concern for the child

The Parent and Child:

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

The above list may not be *all* the signs of abuse or neglect. It is important to pay attention to other behaviors that may seem unusual or concerning. In addition to these signs and symptoms, Child Welfare Information Gateway provides information on the risk factors and perpetrators of child abuse and neglect fatalities: https://www.childwelfare.gov/can/risk_perpetrators.cfm

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
- Abuses animals or pets

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

- Offers conflicting, unconvincing, or no explanation for the child's injury, or provides an explanation that is not consistent with the 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
- Has a history of abusing animals or pets

Signs of Neglect

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

- Is frequently absent from school
- Begs or steals food or money

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- 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 bedwetting
- 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
- Attaches very quickly to strangers or new adults in their environment

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

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THE IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA ON WELL-BEING

Child abuse and neglect can have lifelong implications for victims, including on their well-being. While the physical wounds heal, there are several long-term consequences of experiencing the trauma of abuse or neglect. A child or youth's ability to cope and even thrive after trauma is called "resilience," and with help, many of these children can work through and overcome their past experiences.

Children who are maltreated often are at risk of experiencing cognitive delays and emotional difficulties, among other issues. Childhood trauma also negatively affects nervous system and immune system development, putting children who have been maltreated at a higher risk for health problems as adults. For more information on the lasting effects of child abuse and neglect, read Child Welfare Information Gateway's factsheet *Long-Term Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect*: https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/long_term_consequences.cfm

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network's webpage What Is Child Traumatic Stress offers definitions, materials on understanding child traumatic stress, and several Q&A documents: http://www.nctsn.org/resources/audiences/parents-caregivers/what-is-cts

The Monique Burr Foundation for Children's brief *Speak Up Be Safe: The Impact of Child Abuse and Neglect* explains the immediate and long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect to child, family, school, and community well-being: http://www.moniqueburrfoundation.org/SUBS/Resources/Impact_of_Abuse_and_Neglect.pdf

The National Council for Adoption's article "Supporting Maltreated Children: Countering the Effects of Neglect and Abuse" explains several issues common to children that have experienced abuse or neglect and offers suggestions for parents and caregivers on talking with children and helping them overcome past traumas: https://www.adoptioncouncil.org/images/stories/documents/NCFA_ADOPTION_ADVOCATE_NO48.pdf

ZERO TO THREE produced *Building Resilience: The Power to Cope With Adversity*, which presents tips and strategies for helping families and children build resilience after trauma: http://www.zerotothree.org/maltreatment/31-1-prac-tips-beardslee.pdf

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Resources

Child Welfare Information Gateway's web section on child abuse and neglect provides information on identifying abuse, statistics, risk and protective factors, and more: https://www.childwelfare.gov/can/

The Information Gateway Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect webpage provides information about mandatory reporting and how to report suspected abuse: https://www.childwelfare.gov/responding/reporting.cfm

The National Child Abuse Prevention Month web section provides tip sheets for parents and caregivers, available in English and Spanish, that focus on concrete strategies for taking care of children and strengthening families: https://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/preventionmonth/tipsheets.cfm

Information Gateway also has produced a number of publications about child abuse and neglect:

- *Child Maltreatment: Past, Present, and Future:* https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue_briefs/cm_prevention.pdf
- *Long-Term Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect:* https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/long_term_consequences.pdf
- *Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect:* https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/preventingcan.pdf
- *Understanding the Effects of Maltreatment on Brain Development:* https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue_briefs/brain_development/brain_development.pdf

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) produced *Understanding Child Maltreatment*, which defines the many types of maltreatment and the CDC's approach to prevention, in addition to providing additional resources: http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/cm_factsheet2012-a.pdf

Prevent Child Abuse America is a national organization dedicated to providing information on child maltreatment and its prevention: http://www.preventchildabuse.org/index.shtml

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network strives to raise the standard of care and improve access to services for traumatized children, their families, and communities: http://www.nctsn.org/

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Stand for Children advocates for improvements to, and funding for, programs that give every child a fair chance in life: http://stand.org/

A list of organizations focused on child maltreatment prevention is available in Information Gateway's National Child Abuse Prevention Partner Organizations page: https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp.cfm?rs_id=21&rate_chno=19-00044

Acknowledgment:

This updated factsheet is based on a previous publication that was adapted, with permission, from *Recognizing Child Abuse: What Parents Should Know.* Prevent Child Abuse America. ©2003.

Suggested Citation:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2013). *What is child abuse and neglect? Recognizing the signs and symptoms.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.