



# What Adults Need To Know About Child Abuse

## What Is Child Abuse?

*Child abuse* can be physical, sexual, or emotional. Neglect—the failure to provide for a child’s basic physical and emotional needs—is also a form of child abuse. In homes where child abuse occurs, fear, instability, and confusion may replace the love, comfort, and nurturing that children need. Although child abuse may not always lead to serious physical injury, it often results in serious emotional harm and may have long-lasting effects.

As an adult you may encounter a child who has been hurt by abuse. Regardless of your role in that child’s life—parent, teacher, coach, neighbor, family member—you can help. Children who have experienced abuse need caring adults to help them recognize it’s not their fault, to provide support, and to help them grow into healthy adults. Whether it’s helping to protect a child or helping a child to heal and thrive, you can make a difference in a child’s life.

## What Should You Know About Child Abuse?

Child abuse is seldom a single event. It usually occurs with regularity, often increasing in severity and in conjunction with other types of abuse and neglect. Child abuse happens in every community, rural and urban, and crosses all boundaries of economics, race, ethnic heritage, and religious faith. Most often the abuser has a close relationship with the child (such as a parent, stepparent, or other caregiver). However, abuse by strangers does occur.

Abused children may live in constant fear of harm. They may feel guilty for loving the abuser or blame themselves for causing the violence. In addition to suffering direct physical injuries from the abuse, child victims may also develop physical illnesses, eating disorders, sleep disturbances, speech disorders, or developmental lags in their motor skills. They may become self-destructive.

The impact on children may not be noticeable for some time and may surface at various points throughout a child’s life. For instance, children from violent homes are at higher risk for alcohol or drug abuse and juvenile delinquency.

Abuse affects children differently, based on a number of factors, including the nature of the abuse, the age of the child, the relationship between the child and the abuser, and the child’s environment. It’s also important to know that help exists—for children and their families and friends.

## What Are the Signs of Child Abuse and Neglect?

### *In younger children—*

- Unexplained bruises, cuts, burns, or other injuries.
- Poor personal hygiene and clothing that is ill-fitting, dirty, or inappropriate to the weather.
- Reluctance or fear of going home, and excessive fear or anxiety about doing something wrong.
- Extreme behaviors, such as being unusually passive or aggressive.
- Acting either inappropriately adult (taking care of other children) or inappropriately infantile (rocking, thumb-sucking, tantrums).
- Displaying more knowledge or interest in sexual acts than is normal, including acting out sexually explicit behavior.
- Often late or absent from school.

### *In older youth—*

- Changes in eating or sleeping habits.
- Aggressive or inappropriate behavior.
- Depression, anxiety, or mood swings.
- Attention-seeking behavior.
- Increased risk-taking.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Declining school performance or absences.
- Withdrawal from friends.
- Physical distress (e.g., recurring headaches or stomachaches).
- Running away.
- Sexual promiscuity.

## How Do I Respond to a Child Who Has Been Abused?

If a child tells you that he or she has been abused, one of the most important things you can do is stay calm. You should also—

- Listen to the child's words and expressed emotions. Believe the child and stress that his or her safety is important.
- Not press the child for more information.
- Reassure the child that he or she has done nothing wrong. Abuse is never a child's fault.
- Remember that the people who harm children are often people whom children love.
- Avoid negative comments. Encourage the child, saying that he or she did the right thing by telling and that it was brave to tell.

You may not feel confident about discussing this sensitive subject with children, especially if you have never done so. Please see [Tips for Talking to Children About Child Abuse](#) for age-appropriate language to help you respond to children's commonly asked questions about abuse and neglect.

## What Else Can I do To Help?

If you suspect that a child is the victim of abuse or neglect, report your suspicions to your local child protective services agency. These professionals work to ensure that children are safe and, whenever possible, try to keep families together. If you think the child may be in immediate danger, call your local emergency number (usually 911) or your local law enforcement agency. Even though you may be reluctant to get involved, you may be the only person in a position to help a child who is being abused.

If you are a "mandated reporter"—a person in a profession such as a social worker, teacher, or child care provider—you are required by law to report suspected abuse. Laws about reporting suspected child abuse vary from state to state. For more information about laws and reporting procedures in your state, visit the Child Welfare Information

Gateway Web site, hosted by the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, at [www.childwelfare.gov/responding/mandated.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/responding/mandated.cfm).

## Resources for Information and Assistance

ChildHelp National Child Abuse Hotline  
Crisis counselors are available to talk 24 hours/day.  
1-800-4-A-CHILD or 1-800-422-4453  
[www.childhelp.org](http://www.childhelp.org)

National Coalition to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation  
This Web site provides information about organizations nationwide that are working together to prevent child abuse.  
[www.preventtogether.org](http://www.preventtogether.org)

National Domestic Violence Hotline  
Advocates are available 24 hours/day to provide resources and support.  
1-800-799-SAFE  
[www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org)

National Sexual Assault Hotline  
This 24-hour online hotline provides free and confidential support to survivors of sexual assault and their family and friends.  
[www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> D. Finkelhor et al., 2009, "Violence, Abuse, and Crime Exposure in a National Sample of Children and Youth," *Pediatrics* 124(5).

<sup>2</sup> Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, "Statistical Briefing Book," <http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/victims/overview.html>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., *calculations*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

**Office for Victims of Crime**  
810 Seventh Street NW., Washington, DC 20531  
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