

FACTS ABOUT CHILD ABUSE

What is Child Abuse and Neglect?

Child abuse can be defined as a non-accidental (or substantial risk of) injury or pattern of injuries to a child inflicted or allowed to be inflicted by a parent, guardian, caretaker, or custodian. Child abuse includes:

- *Physical Abuse*

Examples of physical abuse include, but are not limited to: beating, harmful restraint, use of a weapon or instrument, or actions that result in or could result in serious physical injury.

- *Sexual Abuse*

Sexual abuse is any sexual behavior imposed on a juvenile. This involves a range of activities, including fondling the genital area, masturbation, oral sex, or vaginal or anal penetration by a finger, penis, or other object. It also includes exhibitionism, child pornography, and use of suggestive behaviors or comments.

- *Emotional Abuse*

Emotional abuse is expressing attitudes or behaviors toward a child that create serious emotional or psychological damage as evidenced by the juvenile's severe anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or aggressive behavior towards self or others.

- *Neglect*

Child neglect is defined as any serious disregard for a juveniles' supervision, care, or discipline.

Signs of Possible Sexual Abuse

- Exhibiting sexual behaviors that are not appropriate for the child's age
- A detailed and sophisticated understanding of sexual behavior
- Reversion to behaviors such as bed-wetting, speech loss, and thumb-sucking
- Sleep disturbances or nightmares
- Pain, itching, bruising, or bleeding in the genital area
- Venereal disease
- Frequent urinary tract or yeast infections

Sexually abused older children may also:

- Exhibit delinquent or aggressive behaviors
- Show signs of depression
- Display self-injurious behaviors such as substance abuse, self-mutilation, suicide attempts, prostitution, or running away

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Signs of Possible Emotional Abuse

- Speech disorders
- Delayed physical or emotional development
- Ulcers, asthma, severe allergies
- Habit disorders such as sucking or rocking
- Unduly passive and undemanding
- Very low self-esteem
- Extremely demanding, aggressive, or angry behavior
- Antisocial, destructive attitude

- Depressed or suicidal tendencies
- Attention seeking activities
- Delinquent behavior – especially in adolescents

Signs of Possible Physical Abuse

- Unexplained bruises in various states of healing
- Self-destructive behaviors
- Welts, human bite marks, bald spots
- Unexplained burns – especially cigarette burns or glove-like burns
- Unexplained fractures, injuries, or abrasions
- Nervousness, hyperactivity, aggressiveness, disruptive and destructive behaviors
- Unusual wariness of physical contact
- Fear of parent or caretaker
- Lack of expressed emotion
- Unduly shy, withdrawn, and passive
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Signs of Possible Neglect

- Abandonment by parent or caregiver
- Unattended medical needs
- Consistent lack of supervision
- Consistent hunger, inappropriate dress, poor hygiene
- Lice, distended stomach
- Poor social skills
- Indiscriminate about his/her affection
- Pale, listless, begs or steals food, frequent absences from school
- Falls asleep in class, regularly displays fatigue
- Self-destructive behaviors

Identifying Child Abuse and Neglect

Abuse is rarely one physical attack or one isolated incident. Often, there is a pattern of behavior that emerges over a period of time. Children often have difficulty talking about the abuse. This leads to many children “acting out” as a way of expressing their hurt or anger.

It is important to remember that even if you see signs, they do not necessarily mean that a child has been abused. The signs will vary according to the type of abuse, its intensity, and the age of the child.

Some children who are abused display no signs. For this reason, it is important to listen carefully to any child who tells you about an act of abuse.

The Law

North Carolina statutes define an abused child as: any juvenile less than 18 years of age whose parent, guardian, custodian, or caretaker inflicts or allows serious physical injury by other than

accidental means, or creates or allows to be created serious risk of injury, cruel or grossly inappropriate behavior modifications, or sexual abuse.

North Carolina statutes define a neglected child as: any juvenile who does not receive proper care, supervision, or discipline from the juvenile's parent, guardian, or caretaker; or who has been abandoned, or not provided necessary medical care, or who lives in an environment injurious to the juvenile's welfare, or who has been placed for care or adoption in violation of the law. In determining whether a juvenile is neglected, it is relevant whether that juvenile lives in a home where another juvenile has died because of abuse or neglect or lives in a home where another juvenile has been subjected to sexual abuse or severe physical abuse by an adult who regularly lives in the home.

Who Should Report Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect

Any person or institution that has cause to suspect that a child is being abused or neglected is required by law to report it. If you make a report in good faith, you will receive immunity from possible civil or criminal liability that may result from your report.

Why You Should Report Child Abuse:

Reporting suspected child abuse is the first important step in stopping the abuse and protecting the child from future harm. By reporting, you are helping the family get the services and help that they need.

Failure to report suspected cases of child abuse lead to continuing abuse. Abused children carry the trauma associated with abuse throughout their lives unless treatment, assistance, and support are provided. Failure to report a suspected case of child abuse or neglect can be punished as a misdemeanor.

Because child abuse rarely stops without intervention and help, it is the law that every citizen report suspected abuse and neglect. You can help stop the cycle of abuse by notifying your county Department of Social Services – Child Protective Services Unit when you suspect that a child is being abused or neglected.

If a report is not accepted for investigation and you still have concerns, you may request a review of the agency's decision by contacting the agency. If the decision is made by the Department of Social Services not to file a petition and you do not agree, you can request a review by the District Attorney.

Helping a Child You Suspect Has Been Abused or Neglected

When a child tells you that he/she has been abused, the child may feel scared, guilty, ashamed, angry, and powerless. You may feel a sense of outrage, disgust, sadness, anger, and disbelief. However, it is important that you remain calm and in control of your feelings in order to reassure the child that something will be done to keep him/her safe.

You Can Show Your Care and Concern By

- Listening carefully to what the child is saying
- Telling the child you believe him/her
- Telling the child the abuse was not his/her fault
- Letting the child know you will make a report to help stop the abuse

You Will Not Be Helping The Child If You

- Make promises you cannot keep, such as promising that you will not tell anyone
- Push the child into giving details of the abuse – your role is to listen to what the child wants to tell you
- Ask direct questions to the child – this could be harmful to the investigation
- Discuss what the child has told you with others who are not directly involved with helping the child

Source: “Reporting Child Abuse & Neglect,” published by Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina and North Carolina Division of Social Services