



Child Abuse: Basic Information

An abused or neglected child is a child who is harmed, or threatened with physical or mental harm, by the acts or lack of action of a person in a caretaking relationship to the child. There are several forms of abuse: neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse. Child neglect is a form of abuse that occurs when a person responsible for the care of a child is able, but fails, to provide necessary food, clothing, shelter, or care. Each state has its own definitions and laws concerning child abuse and child neglect.

Child abuse and neglect are serious problems for our society. The number of cases reported has increased each year since 1976, when statistics were first kept. Brief discussions of each form of abuse are presented below.

Neglect

A child is neglected if the persons this child depends on do not provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education, and supervision. When these basic needs are *deliberately withheld*, not because the parents or caregivers are poor, it is considered neglect. Often parents or caregivers of neglected children are so overwhelmed by their own needs that they cannot recognize the needs of their children.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is the deliberate injury of a child by a person responsible for the child's care. Physical abuse often stems from unreasonable punishment, or punishment that is too harsh for the child. Sometimes it is the result of a caregiver's reaction to stress. Drinking and drug abuse by caretakers have become more common contributing factors in physical abuse cases.

Physical abuse injuries can include bruises, broken bones, burns, and abrasions. Children experience minor injuries as a normal part of childhood, usually in predictable places such as the shins, knees, and elbows. When the injuries are in soft-tissue areas on the abdomen or back, or don't seem to be typical childhood injuries, physical abuse is a possible cause.

Physical abuse happens to children of all age groups; however, youth ages 12 to 17 have the highest rate of injury from physical abuse. This is possibly due to increasing conflict between parents and children as children become more independent.

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is harder to recognize but is just as harmful to the child as other forms of abuse. Emotional abuse damages the child's self-esteem and, in extreme cases, can lead to developmental problems and speech disorders. A child suffers from emotional abuse when constantly ridiculed, rejected, blamed, or compared unfavorably with brothers or sisters or other children.

Expecting too much from the child in academics, athletics, or other areas is a common cause of emotional abuse by parents or other adults. When a child can't meet these expectations, the child feels that he or she is never quite good enough.

Sexual Abuse

When an adult or an older child uses his or her authority over a child to involve the child in sexual activity, it is sexual abuse, and that person is a child molester. The molester might use tricks, bribes, threats, or force to persuade the child to join in sexual activity. Sexual abuse includes any activity performed for the sexual satisfaction of the molester, including acts ranging from exposing his or her sex organs (exhibitionism), to observing another's sex organs or sexual activity (voyeurism), to fondling and rape.

Here are a few facts you should know about child sexual abuse:

- Child sexual abuse occurs to as many as 25 percent of girls and 14 percent of boys before they reach 18 years of age.
- Boys and girls could be sexually abused at any age; however, most sexual abuse occurs between the ages of 7 and 13.
- Children are most likely to be molested by someone they know and trust.
- Eighty to 90 percent of sexually abused boys are molested by acquaintances who are nonfamily members.
- Females perform 20 percent of the sexual abuse of boys under age 14 (prepubescents).
- Few sexually abused children tell anyone that they have been abused. Children are usually told to keep the abuse secret. This could involve threats, bribes, or physical force.
- Children might feel responsible for the abuse and fear an angry reaction from their parents.