

Signs and Symptoms of Child Abuse

Physical Abuse

Most injuries to children occur accidentally and can be explained simply, injuries that are not explained adequately by the child or caregivers or are not consistent with that explanation may indicate abuse.

The following are some of the signs that may indicate abuse:

- Bruising to the face (other than the forehead) especially cheeks, eyes, ears and mouth
- Bleeding from the mouth or ears
- Bruising around the neck
- Bruising in pattern suggestive of finger or handprint, or of implement mark such as stick or belt
- Bite marks especially of adult size
- Multiple bruising of different ages (more than expected for stage of child's development)
- Burns and scalds, especially cigarette burns or burn injuries with inadequate or inconsistent explanation and which are recurrent.
- Fractures, especially of a child under 2 years
- Loss of consciousness, or fits when other causes are eliminated
- Poisoning, including prescribed or illicit drugs, alcohol, household substances
- Sudden Infant Death Syndrome
- Fabrication or suggestion of symptoms, tampering with test results or inducing illness
- Bruising to the sexual areas (may indicate sexual abuse)
- Round red burns on soft, tender, non-protruding parts of the body such as inside the mouth, inside of legs, behind the knees, inside the arms and on genitals.
- Torn frenulum (upper mouth) in babies could be result of rough handling or physical assault
- Admission of punishment that appears excessive
- Fear of undressing
- Fear of medical intervention
- Absence from school

Sexual Abuse

Whilst there are many signs that have been associated with sexual abuse, some of these have been also associated with medical or emotional problems. It is therefore important that when there are worries about a child's behaviour, which cannot be explained satisfactorily, sexual abuse, should be borne in mind as a possible explanation.

Disturbed behaviours including self-harm, inappropriate sexual behaviours, sadness, depression and loss of self-esteem have all been linked to sexual abuse. The severity of impact is likely to increase the longer it goes on.

The extent of premeditation, the degree of threat and coercion, sadism and bizarre or unusual acts may add to the severity of impact.

Sexually abused children are frequently obedient to adults and anxious to please but have poor peer group relationships particularly in the younger age group. Some abused children in this age group do not reveal any external symptoms.

The following are some of the sign that may indicate abuse:

- Genital or anal lacerations, bleeding or trauma
- Genital or peri-anal inflammation or irritation
- Persistent or recurrent vaginal discharge
- Sexually transmitted disease including warts
- Pregnancy
- Recurrent urinary infections or cystitis
- Sudden and unexpected bedwetting or soiling
- Recurrent unexplained abdominal pain
- In younger children – overt sexualised behaviour, compulsive masturbation, acting-out and aggressive behaviour, drawing or play activities that are sexually explicit
- In older children – withdrawn and/or overtly compliant behaviour, depression and suicidal behaviour, self-mutilation, running away, being absent from school, substance abuse
- Any age – sudden change in normal behaviour or sexual awareness and knowledge advanced for years of development
- Known prostitution
- Unexplained gifts or money
- Refusing to stay with certain persons or unhappy at being looked after by certain persons

Children who are being sexually abused do not necessarily display any behavioural disturbances. They may also show other signs such as physical abuse.

Neglect

Persistent neglect can lead to serious impairment of health and development and long-term difficulties with social functioning, relationships and educational progress. In extreme cases, neglect can lead to death. Children require the provision of care to be consistent and appropriate to the age of the child, their understanding and their development. Failure to meet the basic needs over a period of time, or failure to ensure access to appropriate medical treatment may result in a range of symptoms.

The following are some of the signs that may indicate neglect:

- Failure to thrive where medical investigation has excluded any medical reason
- Disturbance of appetite including reluctance to eat, eating large quantities of food, or stealing food
- Poor skin care, hair loss or poor condition, cold red hands and feet
- Poor hygiene
- Inadequate clothing for the time of year
- Lack of appropriate supervision leading to risk of accidental injury
- Developmental delay, impaired language skills, poor social skills, being unenthusiastic and disinterested
- Persistent failure to seek or to follow necessary medical advice or treatment
- Poor/non-school attendance, poor academic attainment
- Dirty, smelly and always hungry
- Abandonment or desertion
- Left alone without appropriate supervision especially at an early age
- Unhygienic home conditions
- Poor relationships with peers, but attention seeking from adults

Emotional Abuse

There is increasing evidence of the adverse long-term consequences for children's development where they have been subject to sustained emotional abuse. Emotional abuse has an important impact on developing a child's mental health, behaviour and self-esteem. It can be especially damaging in infancy.

Underlying emotional abuse is as important as other more visible forms of abuse in terms of its impact on a child. The extent of emotional abuse will need to be judged in respect of the context in which abuse is occurring and may be influenced by family environment and subsequent life events.

It may feature age or developmentally inappropriate expectations being imposed on children. It may involve causing children frequently to feel frightened or in danger, or the exploitation or corruption of a child. Some level of abuse is involved in all types of ill-treatment of a child, though it may be present on its own.

The following may indicate some of the signs of emotional abuse:

- Continuous withholding of approval and affection by the parent/caregiver
- Discipline that is severe and inappropriate or which is non-existent with few or no boundaries set
- Exploitation by the parents/caregiver to fulfil their needs.
- Impaired ability for play and enjoyment
- Lack of curiosity and natural exploration, air of detachment
- Persistent head-banging or rocking in a younger child
- Delayed social and language skills
- Low self-esteem, feeling of worthlessness
- Eating disturbances, poor growth
- Family history of domestic violence, mental illness of a carer or substance misuse
- Behavioural difficulties including aggression and disruptive behaviour
- Bedwetting and soiling
- Self-harm, overdose or attempted suicide.
- Fear of new situations
- Inappropriate emotional responses to painful situations
- Social isolation from friends
- Constant frozen watchfulness
- Pseudo-mature or explicit sexual behaviour
- Open masturbation or aggressive sex play with peers
- Only happy at school or kept away
- Stomach pains without medical explanation

It must be remembered that emotional abuse will also be an element of other forms of ill-treatment of a child as well as occurring alone.

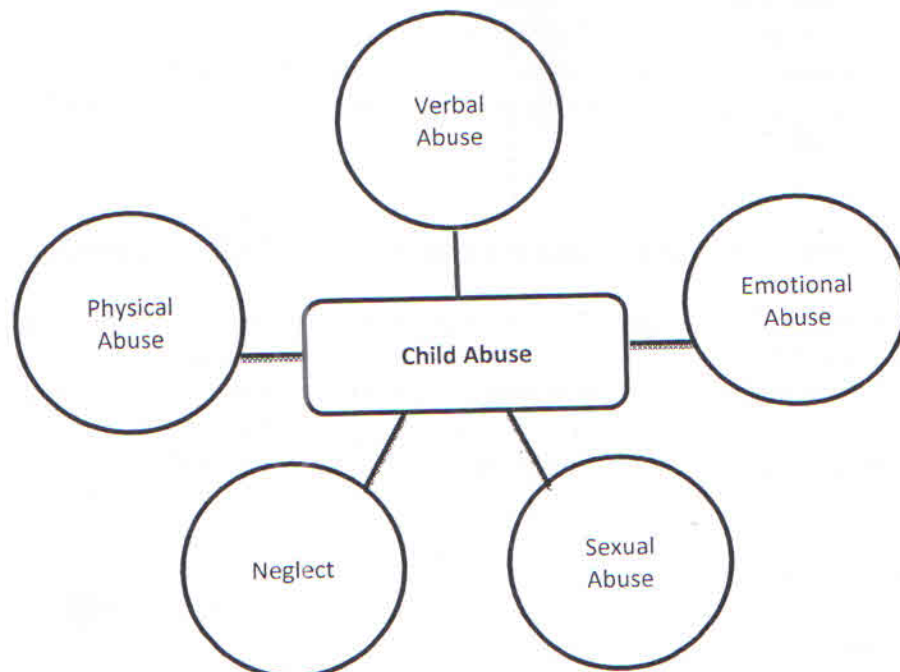
The Nature of Child Abuse

This hand-out explains what Child Abuse is and lists the signs and symptoms parents and caregivers can use to identify potential child abuse. Identification of child abuse is difficult and normally requires in-depth social and medical assessment. This list is not exhaustive and signs and symptoms; however, it can be a useful guide to trigger assessment.

The sustained abuse of children physically, emotionally, sexually, verbally, or by neglect can have major long-term effects on all aspects of a child's health, development and well-being. Sustained abuse is likely to have a deep impact on the child's self-image and self-esteem and on their future life as an adult. Thereby, it is important to catch child abuse at an early stage and provide timely intervention.

- **How can Child Abuse be inflicted?**

Child Abuse can be inflicted by physical, sexual, verbal assaults or by failing to act to prevent harms such as neglect. Harm can also be inflicted emotionally.



Verbal Abuse

Verbal Abuse involves hurting any other individual through extremely negative words, swearing, bullying, and the like that are intended to demotivate a child and harm the child's well-being.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse may involve hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning, suffocating or otherwise causing physical harm to a child. Physical harm may also be caused when a parent or carer feigns the symptoms of, or deliberately causes ill health to a child whom they are looking after.

Neglect

Neglect is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development. It may involve a parent or carer failing to provide adequate food, shelter and clothing, failing to protect a child from physical harm or danger, or the failure to ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment. It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including penetrative acts or non-penetrative acts. It may include non-contact activities, such as involving children looking at, or participating in the production of, pornographic material or watching sexual activity, or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways.

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is the persistent emotional ill-treatment of a child such as to cause severe and persistent adverse effects on the child's emotional development. It may involve conveying to the child that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate or valued only so far as they meet the needs of another person. It may feature age or developmentally inappropriate expectations being imposed on children. It may involve causing children frequently to feel frightened or in danger, or the exploitation or corruption of a child. Some level of emotional abuse is involved in all types of ill-treatment of a child, though it may be present on its own.

- **Is there a relationship between Child Abuse and Domestic Violence?**

Children exposed to abuse may also have been exposed to domestic violence* and/or discontinuity of care. Prolonged and/or regular exposure to domestic violence can have a serious impact on a child's development and emotional well-being, including a threat to an unborn child. This may include physical assault as a result of a child's intervention between the adult participants, emotional distress or exposure to substance or drug abuse, which can be neglectful.

Children of any age but especially those of an age and comprehension about what is going on in the family can be greatly distressed by witnessing the physical and emotional suffering of a parent.

**Although Domestic Violence is NOT a category on the child protection register, it is consistently linked to cases and incidence of child abuse and therefore warrants description here.*

- **Who can abuse children?**

Children may be abused in a family or in an institution or community setting; by those known to them, or more rarely, by a stranger. They may be abused by an adult or adults or another child or children, male or female.