

# Recognizing Child Abuse and Neglect

Child abuse affects children of every age, race, and income level. It often takes place in the home and comes from a person the child knows and trusts—a parent, relative, babysitter, or friend of the family.

Often abusers are ordinary people caught in stressful situations: young mothers and fathers unprepared for the responsibilities of raising a child; overwhelmed single parents with no support system; families placed under great stress by poverty, divorce, or sickness; parents with alcohol or drug problems.

A first step in helping or getting help for an abused or neglected child is to identify the signs and symptoms of abuse. There are four major types of child maltreatment: neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse:

**Neglect** is failure to provide for a child's basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education, or proper supervision.

Possible symptoms:

- ☆ The child shows signs of malnutrition or begs, steals, or hoards food.
- ☆ The child has poor hygiene: matted hair, dirty skin, or severe body odor.
- ☆ The child has unattended physical or medical problems.
- ☆ The child states that no one is home to provide care.
- ☆ The child or caretaker abuses drugs or alcohol.

**Physical Abuse** is intentional injury inflicted upon a child. It may include severe shaking, beating, kicking, punching, or burning that results in minor marks, bruising, or even death.

Possible symptoms:

- ☆ The child has broken bones or unexplained bruises, burns, or welts in various stages of healing.
- ☆ The child is unable to explain an injury, or explanations given by the child or caretaker are inconsistent with the injury.
- ☆ The child is unusually frightened of a parent or caretaker, or is afraid to go home.
- ☆ The child reports intentional injury by parent or caretaker.

**Sexual Abuse** refers to any sexual act with a child by an adult or older child. It includes fondling or rubbing the child's genitals, penetration, incest, rape, sodomy, indecent exposure, and using the child for prostitution or the production of pornographic materials.

Possible symptoms:

- ☆ The child has pain or bleeding in anal or genital area with redness or swelling.
- ☆ The child displays age-inappropriate play with toys, self, or others.
- ☆ The child has inappropriate knowledge about sex.
- ☆ The child reports sexual abuse.



**Emotional Abuse** may occur when a parent fails to provide the understanding, warmth, attention, and supervision the child needs for healthy psychological growth.

Possible symptoms:

- ☆ The parent or caretaker constantly criticizes, threatens, belittles, insults, or rejects the child with no evidence of love, support, or guidance.
- ☆ The child exhibits extremes in behavior from overly aggressive to overly passive.
- ☆ The child displays delayed physical, emotional, or intellectual development.

