

Information on the Definitions and Indicators of Child Abuse

Belin Memorial United Methodist Church ~ Safe Sanctuary Training

Four Main Divisions of Child Abuse

neglect physical abuse sexual abuse emotional abuse

NEGLECT

Neglect is when a parent/caregiver does not provide for the basic emotional and physical needs of the child on an ongoing basis. Examples of neglect include not providing the proper:

- » food
- » clothing
- » housing
- » supervision
- » safe surroundings
- » personal health care
- » medical and emotional care
- » education

Children who are neglected physically and emotionally may not develop normally. Some children may suffer permanent damage.

PHYSICAL ABUSE

Physical abuse includes anything a parent/caregiver does that results in physical harm to a child. Physical abuse may happen if a child is punished harshly, even though the parent/caregiver may not have meant to hurt the child. Examples of physical abuse include:

- » bruises
- » marks in the shape of objects or handprints
- » shaking
- » burns
- » human bite marks
- » fractures of the skull, arms, legs and ribs
- » female genital mutilation

Physical abuse may result in a minor injury (such as a bruise) to a more serious injury which could cause lasting damage or death (for example from shaking a child).

SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual abuse occurs when a person uses power over a child, and involves the child in any sexual act. This abuser is more powerful because of age, intelligence, physical strength, control over the child, and the child's need to be taken care of by others. The offender gets the child to participate by using threats, bribes, lying and taking advantage of the child's trust. Sexual abuse includes involving the child in acts such as:

- » fondling (touching the child in a sexual way)
- » getting the child to touch the adult inappropriately
- » oral sex
- » inserting fingers, penis, or objects in the vagina or anus
- » exposing oneself
- » allowing a child to watch pornography
- » involving a child in pornography or prostitution.

Most sexual offenders are people the children know.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE

A parent/caregiver who continually uses any of the following when interacting or disciplining a child is emotionally abusing the child.

- » rejecting (e.g., saying "I wish you were never born")
- » criticizing (e.g., saying "Why can't you do anything right?")
- » insulting (e.g., saying "I can't believe you would be so stupid")
- » humiliating (e.g., embarrassing a child in front of other people)
- » isolating (e.g., not allowing a child to play with friends)
- » terrorizing (e.g., scaring a child by saying "The police will come and take you away")
- » corrupting (e.g., always swearing in front of the child, or getting the child to participate in things against the law)
- » not responding emotionally

Children who witness violence in their home may suffer emotional damage watching a loved one being physically or verbally attacked.

For other good information see: <http://www.childabuse.com/help.htm>

Signs of Abuse

When you have concerns for a child's well-being, the indicators listed below may help guide you in your thought process. Many of these "symptoms" or "signs" could be caused by things other than abuse or neglect. Generally, these indicators do indicate that a child's safety may be at risk and, at the very least, the situation should be assessed by a professional able to determine the causes of these symptoms and offer the help and assistance necessary to reduce the risk to a child.

Signs of Physical Abuse

Physical Indicators

- Unexplained bruises and welts on the face, throat, upper arms, buttocks, thighs or lower back in unusual patterns or shapes which suggests the use of an instrument (belt buckle, electric cord) on an infant in various stages of healing regularly appear after absence, weekend, or vacation
- Unexplained burns cigarette burns, especially found on palms, soles of feet, abdomen, buttocks immersion burns producing "stocking" or "Glove" demarcations on hands and feet; "doughnut shaped" on buttocks or genital area
- rope burns
- infected burns indicating delay in treatment burns in the shape of common household utensils or appliances
- inexplicable fractures inappropriate for child's developmental stage

Behavioral Indicators

- behavioral extremes (withdrawal, aggression, regression, depression)
- inappropriate or excessive fear of parent or caretaker
- antisocial behavior such as substance abuse, truancy, running away fear of going home
- unbelievable or inconsistent explanation for injuries
- lies unusually still while surveying surroundings (for infants)
- unusual shyness, wariness of physical contact

Signs of Sexual Abuse

Physical Indicators

- torn, stained or bloody underclothes
- frequent, unexplained sore throats, yeast or urinary infections
- somatic complaints, including pain and irritation of the genitals
- sexually transmitted diseases
- bruises or bleeding from external genitalia, vagina or anal region
- pregnancy

Behavioral Indicators

- the victim's disclosure of sexual abuse
- regressive behaviors (thumb-sucking, bedwetting, fear of the dark)
- promiscuity or seductive behaviors
- disturbed sleep patterns (recurrent nightmares)
- unusual and age-inappropriate interest in sexual matters
- avoidance of undressing or wearing extra layers of clothes
- sudden decline in school performance, truancy
- difficulty in walking or sitting
- reluctance to be with a specific individual (usually sudden onset of)

Signs of Emotional Abuse

Physical Indicators

- eating disorders, including obesity or anorexia
- speech disorders (stuttering, stammering)
- developmental delays in the acquisition of speech or motor skills
- weight or height level substantially below norm
- flat or bald spots on head (infants)
- nervous disorders (rashes, hives, facial tics, stomach aches)

Behavioral Indicators

- habit disorders (biting, rocking, head-banging)
- cruel behavior, seeming to get pleasure from hurting children, adults or animals; seeming to get pleasure from being mistreated
- age-inappropriate behaviors (bedwetting, wetting, soiling)
- behavioral extremes; overly compliant-demanding; withdrawn-aggressive; listless-excitabile

Signs of Neglect

Physical Indicators

- poor hygiene, including lice, scabies, severe or untreated diaper rash, bedsores, body odor
- squinting
- unsuitable clothing; missing key articles of clothing (underwear, socks shoes); overdressed or underdressed for climate conditions
- untreated injury or illness
- lack of immunizations
- indicators or prolonged exposure to elements (excessive sunburn, insect bites, colds)
- height and weight significantly below age level

Behavioral Indicators

- unusual school attendance
- chronic absenteeism
- chronic hunger, tiredness, or lethargy
- begging or collecting leftovers
- assuming adult responsibilities
- reporting no caretaker at home

How Can I Tell If A Child May Be Abused or Neglected?

It is not necessary that you decide if a child is abused or neglected. Child abuse and neglect are not always easy to identify. For example, bruises may or may not have been caused by abuse. A child coming to school with head lice or dirty clothes may or may not be due to neglect.

Yet, hundreds of people across the country are charged with the duty to be aware of the children they see and work with daily, and to report suspicions of child abuse, neglect, or dependency.

Your interaction with so many children, your knowledge or training regarding child development, and your innate sense of a child's well-being, gives you the ability and responsibility to protect children from abuse and neglect.

Recognizing a child in need of protection goes beyond the legal definitions of abuse, neglect and dependency. It is an accumulation of everything you know and sense about a child or a situation. Recognition does not always come about in a concrete way. It can be an inner voice that tells you that something is just not right