Recognizing Child Abuse and Neglect: Signs and Symptoms

The first step in helping abused or neglected children is learning to recognize the signs of child abuse and neglect. The presence of a single sign does not prove child abuse is occurring in a family, but a closer look at the situation may be warranted when these signs appear repeatedly or in combination.

If you do suspect a child is being harmed, reporting your suspicions may protect the child and get

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help for the family. Any concerned person can report suspicions of child abuse and neglect. Some people (typically certain types of professionals) are required by law to make a report of child maltreatment under specific circumstances—these are called mandatory reporters. For more information, see the Child Welfare Information Gateway publication, Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect: www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/manda.cfm

For more information about where and how to file a report, contact your local child protective services agency or police department. An additional resource for information and referral is the Childhelp® National Child Abuse Hotline (800.4.A.CHILD).

Recognizing Child Abuse

The following signs may signal the presence of child abuse or neglect.

The Child:

• Shows sudden changes in behavior or school performance
• Has not received help for physical or medical problems brought to the parents’ attention
• Has learning problems (or difficulty concentrating) that cannot be attributed to specific physical or psychological causes
• Is always watchful, as though preparing for something bad to happen
• Lacks adult supervision
• Is overly compliant, passive, or withdrawn
• Comes to school or other activities early, stays late, and does not want to go home

The Parent:

• Shows little concern for the child
• Denies the existence of—or blames the child for—the child’s problems in school or at home
• Asks teachers or other caregivers to use harsh physical discipline if the child misbehaves
• Sees the child as entirely bad, worthless, or burdensome
• Demands a level of physical or academic performance the child cannot achieve
• Looks primarily to the child for care, attention, and satisfaction of emotional needs

The Parent and Child:

• Rarely touch or look at each other
• Consider their relationship entirely negative
• State that they do not like each other

Types of Abuse

The following are some signs often associated with particular types of child abuse and neglect: physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. It is important to note, however, that these
types of abuse are more typically found in combination than alone. A physically abused child, for example, is often emotionally abused as well, and a sexually abused child also may be neglected.

**Signs of Physical Abuse**

Consider the possibility of physical abuse when the child:

- Has unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, or black eyes
- Has fading bruises or other marks noticeable after an absence from school
- Seeks frightened of the parents and protests or cries when it is time to go home
- Shrinks at the approach of adults
- Reports injury by a parent or another adult caregiver

Consider the possibility of physical abuse when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- Offers conflicting, unconvincing, or no explanation for the child’s injury
- Describes the child as “evil,” or in some other very negative way
- Uses harsh physical discipline with the child
- Has a history of abuse as a child

**Signs of Neglect**

Consider the possibility of neglect when the child:

- Is frequently absent from school
- Begs or steals food or money
- Lacks needed medical or dental care, immunizations, or glasses
- Is consistently dirty and has severe body odor
- Lacks sufficient clothing for the weather
- Abuses alcohol or other drugs
- States that there is no one at home to provide care

Consider the possibility of neglect when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- Appears to be indifferent to the child
- Seems apathetic or depressed
- Behaves irrationally or in a bizarre manner
- Is abusing alcohol or other drugs

**Signs of Sexual Abuse**

Consider the possibility of sexual abuse when the child:

- Has difficulty walking or sitting
- Suddenly refuses to change for gym or to participate in physical activities
- Reports nightmares or bedwetting
• Experiences a sudden change in appetite
• Demonstrates bizarre, sophisticated, or unusual sexual knowledge or behavior
• Becomes pregnant or contracts a venereal disease, particularly if under age 14
• Runs away
• Reports sexual abuse by a parent or another adult caregiver

Consider the possibility of sexual abuse when the **parent or other adult caregiver**:

• Is unduly protective of the child or severely limits the child’s contact with other children, especially of the opposite sex
• Is secretive and isolated
• Is jealous or controlling with family members

**Signs of Emotional Maltreatment**

Consider the possibility of emotional maltreatment when the **child**:

• Shows extremes in behavior, such as overly compliant or demanding behavior, extreme passivity, or aggression
• Is either inappropriately adult (parenting other children, for example) or inappropriately infantile (frequently rocking or head-banging, for example)
• Is delayed in physical or emotional development
• Has attempted suicide
• Reports a lack of attachment to the parent

Consider the possibility of emotional maltreatment when the **parent or other adult caregiver**:

• Constantly blames, belittles, or berates the child
• Is unconcerned about the child and refuses to consider offers of help for the child’s problems
• Overtly rejects the child

**RESOURCES ON THE CHILD WELFARE INFORMATION GATEWAY WEBSITE**

- **Child Abuse and Neglect**
  www.childwelfare.gov/can/index.cfm
- **Defining Child Abuse and Neglect**
  www.childwelfare.gov/can/defining/
- **Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect**
  www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/
- **Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect**
  www.childwelfare.gov/responding/reporting.cfm

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