

Abuse

- ⇒ One in 9 girls and 1 in 53 boys under the age of 18 experience sexual abuse or assault at the hands of an adult.
- ⇒ 33% of adolescents in America are victim to sexual, physical, verbal, or emotional dating abuse.
- ⇒ Only 1/3 of the teens who were involved in an abusive relationship confided in someone about the violence.

Overview

Any intentional harm or mistreatment to a child under 18 years old is considered child abuse. Child abuse takes many forms, which often occur at the same time.

- **Physical abuse.** Physical child abuse occurs when a child is purposely physically injured or put at risk of harm by another person.
- **Sexual abuse.** Sexual child abuse is any sexual activity with a child, such as fondling, oral-genital contact, intercourse, exploitation, or exposure to child pornography.
- **Emotional abuse.** Emotional child abuse means injuring a child's self-esteem or emotional well-being. It includes verbal and emotional assault — such as continually belittling or berating a child — as well as isolating, ignoring or rejecting a child.
- **Medical abuse.** Medical child abuse occurs when someone gives false information about illness in a child that requires medical attention, putting the child at risk of injury and unnecessary medical care.
- **Neglect.** Child neglect is failure to provide adequate food, shelter, affection, supervision, education, or dental or medical care.

In many cases, child abuse is done by someone the child knows and trusts — often a parent or other relative. If you suspect child abuse, report the abuse to the proper authorities.

Signs and Symptoms

A child who's being abused may feel guilty, ashamed, or confused. He or she may be afraid to tell anyone about the abuse, especially if the abuser is a parent, other relative or family friend. That's why it's vital to watch for red flags, such as:

- Withdrawal from friends or usual activities
- Changes in behavior — such as aggression, anger, hostility, or hyperactivity — or changes in school performance
- Depression, anxiety or unusual fears, or a sudden loss of self-confidence
- An apparent lack of supervision
- Frequent absences from school
- Reluctance to leave school activities, as if he or she doesn't want to go home
- Attempts at running away
- Rebellious or defiant behavior
- Self-harm or attempts at suicide

Specific signs and symptoms depend on the type of abuse and can vary. Keep in mind that warning signs are just that — warning signs. The presence of warning signs doesn't necessarily mean that a child is being abused.

Physical abuse signs and symptoms

- Unexplained injuries, such as bruises, fractures or burns
- Injuries that don't match the given explanation

Sexual abuse signs and symptoms

- Sexual behavior or knowledge that's inappropriate for the child's age
- Pregnancy or a sexually transmitted infection
- Blood in the child's underwear
- Statements that he or she was sexually abused
- Inappropriate sexual contact with other children

Emotional abuse signs and symptoms

- Delayed or inappropriate emotional development
- Loss of self-confidence or self-esteem
- Social withdrawal or a loss of interest or enthusiasm
- Depression
- Avoidance of certain situations, such as refusing to go to school or ride the bus
- Desperately seeks affection
- A decrease in school performance or loss of interest in school
- Loss of previously acquired developmental skills

Neglect signs and symptoms

- Poor growth or weight gain or being overweight
- Poor hygiene
- Lack of clothing or supplies to meet physical needs
- Taking food or money without permission
- Hiding food for later
- Poor record of school attendance
- Lack of appropriate attention for medical, dental, or psychological problems or lack of necessary follow-up care

Parental behavior

Sometimes a parent's demeanor or behavior sends red flags about child abuse.

Warning signs include a parent who:

- Shows little concern for the child
- Appears unable to recognize physical or emotional distress in the child
- Blames the child for the problems
- Consistently belittles or berates the child, and describes the child with negative terms, such as "worthless" or "evil"

- Expects the child to provide him or her with attention and care and seems jealous of other family members getting attention from the child
- Uses harsh physical discipline
- Demands an inappropriate level of physical or academic performance
- Severely limits the child's contact with others
- Offers conflicting or unconvincing explanations for a child's injuries or no explanation at all

Risk Factors

Factors that may increase a person's risk of becoming abusive include:

- A history of being abused or neglected as a child
- Physical or mental illness, such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Family crisis or stress, including domestic violence and other marital conflicts, or single parenting
- A child in the family who is developmentally or physically disabled
- Financial stress, unemployment, or poverty
- Social or extended family isolation
- Poor understanding of child development and parenting skills
- Alcohol, drugs, or other substance abuse

Treatments

Treatment can help both children and parents in abuse situations. The priority is ensuring the safety and protection for children who have been abused. Ongoing treatment focuses on preventing future abuse and reducing the long-term psychological and physical consequences of abuse.

Psychotherapy

Talking with a mental health professional can:

- Help a child who has been abused learn to trust again

- Teach a child about normal behavior and relationships
- Teach a child conflict management and boost self-esteem

Several different types of therapy may be effective, such as:

- **Trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy.** This type of therapy helps a child who has been abused to better manage distressing feelings and to deal with trauma-related memories. Eventually, the supportive parent who has not abused the child and the child are seen together so the child can tell the parent exactly what happened.
- **Child-parent psychotherapy.** This treatment focuses on improving the parent-child relationship and on building a stronger attachment between the two.

Psychotherapy also can help parents:

- Discover the roots of abuse
- Learn effective ways to cope with life's inevitable frustrations
- Learn healthy parenting strategies

If the child is still in the home, social services may schedule home visits and make sure essential needs, such as food, are available. Children who are placed in foster care because their home situation is too dangerous will often need mental health services and therapies.

How Do I Get Help?

If you need help because you're at risk of abusing a child or think someone else has abused or neglected a child, there are organizations that can provide you with information and referrals, such as:

- **Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)**
- **Prevent Child Abuse America: 1-800-CHILDREN (1-800-244-5373)**

If a child tells you he or she is being abused, take the situation seriously. The child's safety is most important. Here's what you can do:

- **Encourage the child to tell you what happened.** Remain calm as you assure the child that it's OK to talk about the experience, even if someone has threatened him or her to keep silent. Focus on listening, not investigating. Don't ask leading questions — allow the child to explain what happened and leave detailed questioning to the professionals.
- **Remind the child that he or she isn't responsible for the abuse.** The responsibility for child abuse belongs to the abuser. Say "It's not your fault" repeatedly.
- **Offer comfort.** You might say, "I'm so sorry you were hurt," "I'm glad that you told me," and "I'll do everything I can to help you." Let the child know you're available to talk or simply listen at any time.
- **Report the abuse.** Contact a local child protective agency or the police department. Authorities will investigate the report and, if necessary, take steps to ensure the child's safety.
- **Help the child remain safe.** Ensure the child's safety by separating the abuser and the child, and by providing supervision if the child is in the presence of the abuser. Help the child get medical attention if needed.
- **Consider additional support.** You might help the child seek counseling or other mental health treatment. Age-appropriate support groups also can be helpful.
- **If the abuse has occurred at school,** make sure the principal of the school is aware of the situation, in addition to reporting it to the local or state child protection agency.

Need help getting connected to a professional? Email counseling@breakdownstl.org for assistance.

Sources:

* Mayo Clinic - <https://www.mayoclinic.org>

*RAINN - <https://www.rainn.org>

*The NO MORE Project - www.loveisrespect.org

*dosomething.org