

WHAT IS CHILD ABUSE?

Child abuse is behavior that hurts a child.

There are 4 types of abuse:

Physical

Hurting a child's body on purpose:

- Hitting, kicking, burning, biting, shaking, using an object to spank

Sexual

Doing sexual things with a child even if the child agrees:

- Touching a child's private parts, oral sex, and sexual intercourse
- Showing a child pornography
- Masturbating or having sex in front of a child
- Taking naked pictures of children

Emotional

Frequently using words or non-physical ways to hurt a child:

- Embarrassing a child on purpose
- Put-downs
- Name-calling



Neglect

Physical Neglect — Not taking care of a child's needs by **NOT**:

- Giving a child enough food, clothing or shelter
- Taking care of a child's physical or medical needs
- Bringing a child to a needed medical visit or not giving a child important medication
- Obtaining needed medical equipment (a wheelchair) or not assisting a child with disabilities to care for herself (changing diapers, bathing)

Emotional Neglect — Not paying attention to a child's feelings so that the child feels unloved and unwanted.

Educational Neglect — Not providing a child with education (keeping a child out of school without a good reason).

Why do parents of children with disabilities need to know about child abuse?

All parents need to know about child abuse because it can happen to any child. Parents of children with disabilities especially need to know about child abuse.

Studies have shown that children with disabilities are 1½ - 10 times more likely to be abused than other children.



Why is this?

Children with disabilities are often singled out by abusers who think of them as "safe" or easy victims because they may **NOT**:

- Be able to yell, call for help or tell someone they have been hurt
- Be able to fight back or run away from someone who is trying to hurt them
- Understand that what is happening to them is abuse
- Know about sex and are unable to tell when someone is abusing them sexually
- Try to stop the abuse because they have been taught to do what adults tell them to do
- Want to upset the abuser and others by telling anyone about the abuse
- Be able to tell the difference between helpful and abusive touches because they are used to others caring for them and touching their bodies
- Believe that they can do anything to stop the abuse because they think people won't believe them

Are There Other Factors?

Yes, there are other factors that increase the risk for abuse like:

- Being isolated from others
- Violence in the child's community
- Violence in the child's home
- Stress in the family
- Alcohol or drug abuse in the child's home



PRACTICE TIP

A good way to help keep your child safe is to teach him about his rights. For instance, he has the right to:

- Not have his body hurt or touched by others.
- Say "no" to things that make him feel uncomfortable.

Tell your child that if someone mistreats him he should tell an adult he trusts. A child can be taught this in different ways depending on what he can understand. For example you can tell him about "rules." You can say:

- "People should not hurt you. People should not touch your private parts."
- "If anyone tells you to do something you do not think is right, tell them 'no.'"

If your child doesn't understand spoken words very well, use puppets or dolls to show him how he should be treated and what type of treatment is not okay. To help you check his understanding about abuse, you can act out different scenes like:

- One puppet hitting another
- A puppet giving a hug to a friend
- A puppet asking to touch the other puppet's private parts
- A parent puppet giving a child puppet a time out

If he does not understand an example, think of another way to act out that idea.

OTHER INFORMATION SHEETS IN THIS SERIES:

How Do I Know if My Child Has Been Abused?
What Should I Do if I Think That My Child Has Been Abused?
What Can I Teach My Child To Help Keep Him Safe?
How Can I Keep My Child Safe?

Did You Know That Abusers Are Not Usually Strangers?

Many parents teach their children about "stranger danger" or staying away from strangers. Although some abusers are strangers, people who abuse children are usually people children know and trust.



Where Can Abuse Happen And By Whom?

Abuse can happen anywhere and by anyone.

It can occur:

- In the home
- At school
- At day-care
- At a friend's house
- In a group home/residential setting
- At a hospital

Abusers usually are people who live and/or work with the child like:

- Babysitters
- Paid caregivers
- Youth group leaders
- Bus drivers
- Group home/residential staff
- Friends
- Family members
- Other children



National Child Abuse Hotline
1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)

HOW DO I KNOW IF MY CHILD HAS BEEN ABUSED?

Know the Signs of Abuse

It is important to know the signs of child abuse because a child with a disability might not be able to tell you exactly what has happened to her. Just because a child shows a sign does not mean she has been abused. When abuse has happened, there are often several signs. You might notice a big change in the way your child looks or behaves.

What Signs Should I Look For?

If a child **tells** you that she has been harmed, believe her and seek help right away. This is the most reliable sign of abuse because children do not usually lie about being abused. More often a child will not talk about abuse so watch for any of these signs:

Physical Abuse

- Cuts, scratches, bruises, broken bones that don't have a good explanation and appear often
- Burns or scalds that don't have a good explanation
- Bite marks and welts
- Broken or missing teeth
- Head injuries (head swelling, seizures, irritability and vomiting)



Sexual Abuse

- Genital discharge, genital/anal pain or swelling
- Difficulty going to the bathroom
- Bruises, scratches or bite marks around the genital area
- Torn or bloody underwear or clothing
- Unexplained pain like stomachaches and headaches
- Pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases
- Sexual behaviors like open mouth kissing, acting out sexual acts, doing oral sex, talking about sex often
- Knowing more about sex than a child should (a 5-year old asking another boy to put his penis in his mouth)
- Masturbating a lot, or so much that a child hurts himself or no longer wants to do other activities he normally enjoys (not wanting to be with friends or ride a bike)
- Putting objects into genital/anal openings



Neglect

- Often hungry or tired (begging for or stealing food, falling asleep in school)
- Often dirty and/or smelling bad
- Dressed wrong for the weather
- Teeth that are severely decayed
- Often ill but not taken to the doctor or not given needed medicine

Neglect (continued)

- Without the needed equipment get around or communicate (wheelchair, hearing aid)
- A home that is very dirty
- Does not attend school and is not home schooled
- Left unattended



Behavior/Mood Changes

These could be a result of physical, sexual, emotional abuse and/or neglect:

- Angry behavior (fighting, hitting, kicking)
- Sadness, frequent crying
- Not wanting to be with other people
- Anxiety about being with a specific person or going to a specific place
- Worrying
- Being clingy to caregivers
- Not listening or paying attention
- Problems with other children
- Acting younger than her age
- Trouble sleeping, including nightmares
- Eating a lot less or more than normal
- Self-harm (hitting, cutting)
- Using alcohol/drugs
- Talking about death and wanting to die



PARENT TIP

You know your child better than anyone. If you are concerned that something is wrong or that something bad has happened, check into it. Sometimes a parent will think that a sign of abuse is a behavior that happens because of a child's disability. For instance, self-harm is a behavior that may be seen with autism. But it can also be a sign that something stressful has happened to a child. If your child acts differently than she normally does, be aware that this change may be a result of something stressful in her life like abuse instead of her disability. There are many people who can help you figure out if your child has been harmed and needs help. These include medical doctors, psychologists, social workers, school counselors and regional center staff.



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WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK MY CHILD HAS BEEN ABUSED?

Talk to Your Child

Ask him if something has happened. Let your child tell you in his own words or his own way what happened. Be careful not to pressure him for details or “put words in his mouth” because he may be easily influenced by something you say. For instance:

Do not ask: “Did your teacher hit you?”

Do ask: “You have been really angry and I saw that you have bruises on your arm. Were you hurt?”

Then ask: “What happened?” or “Who hurt you?”

Children are often afraid to talk about abuse so it is important to tell your child that it is okay to talk about what happened and that he won't get in trouble. You can also tell him that he is brave and did the right thing by telling you. Let him know that the abuser was wrong for hurting him and that he did not do anything wrong. Make sure he knows that you will keep him safe from that person.

Should I Make a Report? What if Someone Thinks I Harmed my Child?

If your child tells you that he has been abused, you should make a report. Many parents don't report abuse because they are afraid that people will think they harmed their child. They might also be afraid that someone from their family or a trusted friend will get in trouble and even try to take revenge. These fears are understandable but your child will continue to be in danger



if you don't report suspected abuse. Apart from physical injury, ongoing abuse can cause severe emotional and behavioral problems for children.

What If I am Not Sure If My Child Was Abused?

If you are not sure that your child is telling the truth, leave it to professionals to get more information. They have special ways to help a child tell what happened. You do not need to get all the details from your child. If you are confused or are afraid to report the abuse talk to your child's medical doctor, therapist, or social worker. They can help to find out if your child has been abused. If so they can help you report it.

How Do I Make A Report?

If you think your child has been abused, you can make a child abuse report by calling your local **child protection agency** or **police station**. If you aren't sure how to get the number for either of these, you can call the **National Child Abuse Hotline**. The hotline can tell you where to report abuse in your community and tell you about agencies that can help you. If you would like to talk to someone the hotline also has counselors.



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What Will I Be Asked?

- Your child's name, gender, date of birth
- Address and telephone number where your child lives
- Your name and name of other family members
- Name of your child's school
- Name of the suspected abuser
- What your child has said or done to make you think he was abused

What Will Happen?

- If your child is in immediate danger, a social worker or police officer will be sent right away to help him.
- If he is not in immediate danger, a social worker will follow up at a later date.
- Whoever follows up will most likely want to talk to your child and other people who may know about the abuse.
- After everyone is interviewed, a decision will be made about how best to keep him safe.



Should I Tell My Child That I Made A Report?

Yes, it is important that your child know you are doing something to keep him safe. Tell him that someone will come to talk to him about what happened and that he should answer questions truthfully. Some children are scared to talk to social workers or policemen. It is important to tell your child that he did the right thing by telling and that he will not be in trouble. Point out that the reason a policeman or social worker will be asking questions is to help keep him safe.

Other Things To Know About Making A Report

- You only have to think that abuse has occurred to make a report. You do not have to be sure that it has happened.
- You do not need to know all the information to make the call. Child protection agencies can help keep a child safe even when they don't have all the information.
- When you make the report be sure to tell the person taking the report that your child has a disability and what his disability is. Also tell them the best ways to communicate with your child.
- If you think that your child was abused and he does not speak or did not tell you, be sure to give specific details to the person taking the report. Tell the person about the signs of abuse you notice and any other information that causes you to think he was abused.



PARENT TIPS

- It may be hard for your child to tell you what has happened if he speaks only a little or not at all. Try communicating with him in other ways to find out what happened. He can show you by drawing a picture or using a doll.
- If your child tells you he has been abused, you will probably be frightened and surprised. Try to be calm and listen to what he says. Show that you accept what he tells you. **DO NOT SAY:**
 "He wouldn't have done that!" or
 "Are you sure that is what happened?"
Saying things like this will confuse your child and may make him feel that he shouldn't talk about it. Whether or not your child was abused, he will need your support.
- If you are nervous about making a report, have a person you trust with you. Write down the important information so you don't forget anything.

WHAT CAN I TEACH MY CHILD TO HELP KEEP HER SAFE?

There are many things you can teach your child to help protect her from abuse. You know her better than anyone. You probably have your own way of communicating with her. Use what you know about your child to help her learn about the following:

Safety Skills: Basic and Self-Protection

Basic safety skills can discourage abusers by showing them that a child knows how to protect herself. Make sure she knows:

- Her phone number
- How to make emergency calls (dialing 911)
- Not to let someone in the house when a parent is not home or is busy
- Not to go for a ride or to another person's home without permission from a parent



Self-protection skills help a child protect herself if someone tries to hurt her. Make sure she knows:

- How and when to say or yell “no” and run away
- Where to go (a safe place) if she becomes scared
- How to identify policemen and firemen (so she can go to them if something is wrong and they are present)



PARENT TIP

You and your child should choose one person in each setting your child is in (school, daycare) that she can go to if someone tries to hurt her or if she is worried someone might hurt her.

Abuse

Your child should be taught about the different kinds of abuse. Another information sheet in this series (*What Is Child Abuse?*) describes different kinds of abuse. It also suggests ways to talk about abuse. The key points to teach your child about abuse are:

- Abusers are usually someone your child knows instead of a stranger

Abuse (continued)

- If she is ever hurt by anyone (even someone she knows and likes), she should immediately tell an adult what happened. If that person doesn't believe or help her, she should tell other adults until she finds an adult who does.

Body Parts

Teach your child the names of her body parts. If have your own names for the genitals (like *private parts*) be sure to also teach her the doctor's office name for these parts (*penis, vagina, breasts and buttocks*). This will help her communicate clearly to others about her body if needed.

Sexual Development

Sex abusers may “target” a child with a disability thinking that the child does not understand her own sexual development and will be easier to abuse. An abuser might even tell a child that he is “teaching” her about her body. It is very important for a child with a disability to learn about sexual development. This way she already has the information and can understand the difference between behavior that is okay and not okay. Be sure that what you teach matches her age and development level:

- A **young child** should be taught about private parts and that no one is allowed to touch them except in certain situations like a doctor during an exam or if she needs help going to the bathroom.
- An **older child** should be taught about puberty, such as the changes that will happen in her body and also changes in the way she feels emotionally.



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Sexual Development (continued)

- An **adolescent/ young adult** needs information about sex and safe sex. Part of teaching an adolescent about sex is telling her about healthy relationships. For instance sex is something that a person does with someone they love and no one should ever be forced or paid to have sex.

If your child comes to you with a question, answer her! Also, talking to your child once about sexual development is not enough. She is more likely to remember information if it is repeated. As she gets older and her relationships change, she will need new and more detailed information.



PARENT TIP

If you feel you don't know enough about sexual development or feel uncomfortable talking about it with your child, get more information by reading a book on the subject or consult her pediatrician about what and how to explain things to her.

Personal Space

It is important for your child to understand the idea of personal space. No one should come into her space and she should not go into others' without permission. If your child is very affectionate, she may need to learn that she should not hug or kiss people she doesn't know and without asking first.

You can teach her about different space with different people. Tell her something like:



"You do not need to ask if you can hug and kiss mommy and daddy because we are your family and we love your hugs and kisses! When you see Bill and Susie you should ask before you hug or kiss them because they are not family. They are friends. You should not ask strangers to give you a hug or kiss."

You may need to remind your child of these differences often.

Assertiveness & Independence

If your child depends on others for her care and abuse. Teaching assertiveness and independence will make her a less likely target for abuse. Teach her:

- Not to listen to an adult that she knows is asking her to do something wrong (If she is unsure, she can tell the adult that she will check with you first.)
- To stand up for herself and tell people "no" if she doesn't like something or doesn't want to do something because she feels uncomfortable
- About self-reliance by showing her how to do things on her own (She will learn to rely less on others and also feel good about her abilities. Help her only when she needs your help. If she asks for help with something that she can do herself, encourage her to try it alone.)
- About choices by giving her options like letting her choose which outfit to wear to school, what she wants for snack, or who she wants to help her in the bathtub (Choices will help her feel in control and responsible.)
- About privacy by giving her as much of it as possible (For instance, if she is able to bathe and clean herself, let her do this alone. All children need time for privacy to encourage healthy boundaries.)
- How to form positive relationships (Talk to your child about what a friend is and how friends should treat each other. If someone is mistreating her, help her work out the relationship, if appropriate, or get away from someone who is not good for her.)

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HOW CAN I KEEP MY CHILD SAFE?

Do Your Homework

Don't automatically think that an agency or all of its staff members are safe. Get information about the people who take care of your child and the agencies they work for.

- Make sure any agencies you bring your child to are licensed to do business
- Check out an agency's record. Find out if there have been any reports of abuse or complaints. Make sure the agency conducts background checks on its employees. Ask about how staff is screened and about policies for reducing and reporting abuse.
- Do background checks on anyone you hire to provide care for your child. Check references of previous employers. Make sure you ask why the person left the previous job. Doing so could help you find out if a person did something wrong that affected his/her past job.



Do More Homework

Check for sexual offenders in your neighborhood. Most states have a website that allows parents to check for sexual offenders in their neighborhoods, school districts or wherever else your child spends time. It can let you know about some dangerous people living near your child. To find your state's website, use search words "Megan's Law" and your state.

Be Aware of Certain Behaviors

An abuser is usually someone a child knows and has a relationship with. Be suspicious of an adult who:

- Tries to spend more time with your child than is normal and seems more interested in your child than in you and your family
- Repeatedly asks to take your child places without you or offers to watch your child so you can do errands, etc.



- Avoid agencies that are physically isolated or have little contact with the community.
- Avoid agencies that don't involve parents in the child's care. You have the right to be informed and aware of what your child is doing when in someone else's care. You should be allowed to observe and visit your child. If a provider is uneasy about letting you do this, be suspicious.



Behaviors (continued)

Be suspicious of an adult who:

- Gives your child gifts for no reason (An abuser might try to bribe a child to participate in the abuse or to keep him quiet. If your child is coming home with new things that he did not have money to buy, ask him who gave them to him and why.)

Check your Suspicions

If your child is spending a lot of time with someone that you are worried about, check that person out by:

- Dropping by unexpectedly
- Asking your child what he does when he is with that person
- Doing a background check on that person



Talk to the People Who Care for Your Child

Having a relationship with people who care for your child will help you know who they are and how they interact with your child.



Talk to Other Parents

Raising a child with a disability, like raising any child, can be joyful and also challenging.

Other parents can give you tips on how they deal with difficult situations and can be supportive when handling difficult issues.

Take Care of Yourself

One of the best ways to take care of your child is to take care of yourself! If you feel stressed, depressed, nervous, or have your own history of abuse, get support.

You can find support in family, friends, support groups, therapy or wherever is most comfortable for you.

A counselor from the National Child Abuse Hotline is also available to speak with you. Call the number listed below.

If you don't feel well, see your doctor. When your body and your mind are well, you have more time and energy for your child. This shows people that there is a caring adult who knows what goes on in your child's life. This in itself may keep an abuser from trying to hurt your child.



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