

A Note of Caution:

A child exhibiting any of the concerns or behaviors listed below needs attention and possibly professional help. **If you see these symptoms, all you know is that a child is experiencing a problem.** More important, every single symptom or behavior listed could be caused by many factors in the child's history or current situation that are not child abuse.

If you are concerned about a child exhibiting these signs or behaviors, try to stay calm. Remember every child is an individual. Every experience is unique. **These checklists are intended to guide someone who is concerned about a child; they are not a definitive tool to determine if a child is being abused.** Any one of these symptoms alone does not indicate abuse. A child exhibiting the behaviors listed below, however, may be struggling and should receive appropriate assistance and support.

Recognizing Signs of Abuse and Neglect

In addition to working to prevent a child from experiencing abuse or neglect, it is important to recognize high-risk situations and the signs and symptoms of maltreatment. If you do suspect a child is being harmed, reporting your suspicions may protect him or her and get help for the family. Any concerned person can report suspicions of child abuse or neglect. **Reporting your concerns is not making an accusation; rather, it is a request for an investigation and assessment to determine if help is needed.**

General signs of abuse and neglect:

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

When a child:

- Shows sudden changes in behavior or school performance
- Has not received help for physical or medical problems brought to the parent's 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- Is overly compliant, passive, or withdrawn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
- Is reluctant to be around a particular person
- Talks to others about mistreatment

When a parent:

- Denies the existence of, or blames the child for, the child's problems in school or at home
- Asks teacher 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 the parent's emotional needs
- Shows little concern for the child

When a parent and child:

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

This list may not be all of the signs of abuse or neglect. It is also important to pay attention to other behaviors that may seem unusual or concerning.

Continue reading to learn more about the types of abuse and signs of abuse specific to each type.

Physical Abuse:

Physical abuse is non-accidental physical injury (ranging from minor bruises to severe fractures or death) as a result of punching, beating, kicking, biting, shaking, throwing, stabbing, choking, hitting (with a hand, stick, strap, or other object), burning, or otherwise harming a child, that is inflicted by a parent, caregiver, or other person who has responsibility for the child.¹ Such injury is considered abuse regardless of whether the caregiver intended to hurt the child. Physical discipline, such as spanking or paddling, is not considered abuse as long as it is reasonable and causes no bodily injury to the child.

Signs of Physical Abuse

- unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, or black eyes
- fading bruises or other marks noticeable after an absence from school
- seems 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
- abuses animals or pets

Or when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- offers conflicting, unconvincing, or no explanation for the child's injury
- provides an explanation that is not consistent with the 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
- has a history of abusing animals or pets

Child Neglect:

Neglect is the failure of a parent, guardian, or other caregiver to provide for a child's basic needs. Neglect may be:

- Physical - failure to provide necessary food or shelter, or lack of appropriate supervision
- Medical - failure to provide necessary medical or mental health treatment
- Educational - failure to educate a child or attend to special education needs
- Emotional - inattention to a child's emotional needs, failure to provide psychological care, or permitting the child to use alcohol or other drugs

Signs of Child Neglect

- frequently absent from school
- begs or steals food or money
- lacks needed medical or dental care, immunization, or glasses
- 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

Or 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
- abuses alcohol or other drugs.

Sexual Abuse:

Involves engaging any child in sexually explicit conduct including: rape, molestation, prostitution, pornography, exposing a child to sexually explicit material, or other forms of sexual exploitation.

Signs of Sexual Abuse:

- difficulty walking or sitting
- suddenly refuses to change for gym or to participate in physical activities
- reports nightmares or bedwetting
- sudden changes in appetite
- bizarre, sophisticated or unusual sexual knowledge or behavior
- pregnancy or venereal disease, especially if under the age of 14
- running away
- reports sexual abuse
- attaches very quickly to strangers or new adults in their environment

Or if the parent is:

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

Emotional Abuse:

A pattern of behavior that impairs a child's emotional development or sense of self-worth. Examples include constant criticism, threats, or rejection, as well as withholding love, support or guidance. This type of abuse is also called psychological abuse and is almost always present when other types of abuse are identified.

Signs of Emotional Abuse:

- extremes in behavior, such as overly compliant or demanding behavior, extreme passivity, or aggression
- inappropriately adult or childlike behavior
- delayed physical or emotional development
- threats of attempts of suicide
- lack of attachment to parents

Or if the parent:

- constantly blames, belittle, or berates the child
- is unconcerned about the child and refuses to consider offers of help
- overtly rejects the child

The above list may not be **all** the signs of abuse or neglect. It is important to pay attention to other behaviors that may seem unusual or concerning.

If you are sharing this document with anyone, please share it as published here. Sharing small parts of limited pieces of the document could result in misunderstanding or misinformation.