



Recognizing Child Abuse: What Parents Should Know

The first step in helping abused children is learning to recognize the symptoms of child abuse. Although child abuse is divided into four types -- physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional maltreatment -- the types are more typically found in combination than alone. A physically abused child for example is often emotionally maltreated as well, and a sexually abused child may be also neglected. Any child at any age may experience any of the types of child abuse. Children over age five are more likely to be physically abused and to suffer moderate injury than are children under age five.

RECOGNIZING CHILD ABUSE

Experienced educators likely have seen all forms of child abuse at one time or another. They are alert to signs like these that may signal the presence of child abuse.

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 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, an overachiever, or too responsible; or
- Comes to school early, stays late, and does not want to go home.

The Parent:

- Shows little concern for the child, rarely responding to the school's requests for information, for conferences, or for home visits;
- Denies the existence of—or blames the child for—the child's problems in school or at home;
- Asks the classroom teacher to use harsh physical discipline if the child misbehaves;
- Sees the child entirely bad, worthless, or burdensome;
- Demands perfection or a level of physical or academic performance the child cannot possibly achieve; or
- Looks primarily to the child for care, attention, and satisfaction of emotional needs.

The Parent and Child When Together:

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

None of these signs proves that child abuse is present in a family. Any of them may be found in any parent or child at one time or another. But when these signs appear repeatedly or in combination, they should cause the educator to take a closer look at the situation and to consider the possibility of child abuse. That second look may reveal further signs of abuse or signs of a particular type of child abuse.

SIGNS OF PHYSICAL ABUSE

Consider the possibility of physical abuse when the child:

- Has unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, or black eyes;
- Offers unusual explanations for injuries;
- Has 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 from school;
- Shrinks at the approach of adults; or
- 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; or
- 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 from classmates;
- Lacks needed medical or dental care, immunizations, or glasses;
- Is consistently dirty and has strong body odor;
- Lacks appropriate clothing for the weather;
- Abuses alcohol or other drugs; or
- States 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; or
- 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;
- Demonstrates bizarre, sophisticated, unusual, or age appropriate sexual knowledge or behavior;
- Becomes pregnant or contracts a venereal disease, particularly if under age fourteen;
- Runs away; or
- 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, severely limits the child's interaction with other children, especially of the opposite gender;
- Is secretive and isolated; or
- Describes marital difficulties involving family power struggles or sexual relations.

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; or
- 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;
- Abuses alcohol or other drugs; or
- States there is no one at home to provide care.