

Protecting God's Children for Adults

Vol. 22 No. 10

Recognizing Child Maltreatment

By [The VIRTUS® Programs](#)

Every child deserves to grow up in a safe environment, free from abuse or other harm. As safe adults, it is up to us to help create the safest environment possible for children and youth. One way we can achieve this is to be mindful of the various types of child abuse and maltreatment, and what we can do if we become aware a child is experiencing (or has experienced) this.

Child maltreatment is the term used to refer to all types of abuse and neglect of anyone under the age of 18 by a parent, caregiver, or other person with the responsibility for safeguarding the child. The four most common forms of child maltreatment include physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect.¹ It's also possible that your specific state may more types of child abuse than the four typical types that are mentioned here.

Physical abuse

Physical abuse is "the use of intentional, physical force that can result in physical injury. Examples include hitting, kicking, shaking, burning, or other shows of force against a child."² The physical abuse of children can result in permanent physical harm and even death. Signs of physical abuse include unusual or frequent bruising, burns, cuts, muscle sprains, unexplained broken bones or other physical marks.³

Indicators of physical abuse can include when children:

- have frequent bruising, cuts, welts or other marks,
- are constantly absent from activities,
- shy away from physical contact,
- act distrustful toward others,
- are fearful of going home,
- frequently have unexplained injuries, and
- wear inappropriate clothing for the weather, such as long pants or long-sleeved shirts in warmer temperatures.

Sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse can include both physical and non-physical actions. Touching a child anywhere on their body in a sexual manner, or forcing a child to touch the private parts of an adult, is child sexual abuse. Non-touching behaviors include voyeurism—such as trying to look at a youth's naked body, or, exhibitionism—meaning exposing one's genitalia to children or, showing pornographic images to children.⁴

A child may be experiencing sexual abuse or exploitation by an adult or another child if:

- there is a sudden change in behavior relating to likes or dislikes, health problems or eating habits,
- they appear increasingly moody or aggressive, withdrawn or depressed,
- they lose interest in school or there is a sudden shift in grades or school activities,
- they become secretive or defensive, including with technology or online activities,
- they become fearful, anxious or *uncomfortable* around certain people,
- they bathe excessively, or stop taking care of personal hygiene, or
- they have regressive behavior such as bed-wetting, or thumb sucking.

Although these behavioral red flags don't necessarily mean that a child is being, or has been abused, they are indicators that something may be a problem and they shouldn't be ignored.

Emotional abuse

Also referred to as verbal or psychological abuse, emotional abuse is any pattern of behavior that harms a child's self-worth or emotional well-being.⁵ It includes name calling, shaming, rejection, threats, withholding love, isolation, humiliation and belittling a child. Emotional abuse is often hidden from view where there may not actually be physical signs, but there are other indicators of possible



emotional abuse.

Indicators of emotional abuse can include when children:

- exhibit fear, intense dislike or detachment toward someone in their lives,
- suffer from sleep or eating disorders,
- exhibit learning disabilities, speech impediments or developmental delays,⁶
- demonstrate destructive or anti-social behavior,
- have low self-esteem,
- experience anxiety,
- are defensive or show age-inappropriate behavior, and
- are extremely withdrawn or anxious about making a mistake and doing something wrong.

Neglect

Neglect is the type of abuse that occurs most frequently among children, with up to one in seven children experiencing neglect.⁷ Neglect is the failure to meet a child's basic needs, including housing, food, clothing, education and access to health care. Signs of neglect in infants and younger children include when they fail to develop and grow appropriately, or appear malnourished. In older children, other signs of neglect may include:

- improper clothing for the weather or ill-fitting clothing,
- a lack of cleanliness or increased body odor,
- being consistently unsupervised,
- inadequate medical or dental care, and
- coming to school or activities hungry, without food or money to purchase food.

Older children may have poor eating habits due to unhealthy caloric intake and/or little supervision, and may appear to be underweight or even overweight. Coping with stress at a young age may result in anorexia, bulimia or obesity. Children experiencing neglect may also attempt to steal food, or money to buy food, and may attempt to hoard food.

Communicating concerns

If you have a suspicion of any type of child abuse or maltreatment, contact the appropriate civil authorities, or a child protection hotline. For reporting information by state, please visit the VIRTUS website: https://www.virtusonline.org/virtus/Abuse_Reporting.cfm.⁸ Even if you are not sure abuse is happening or has happened, but you have a suspicion or concern (meaning the thought has entered your mind that abuse could be occurring), it is always better to act on the side of protecting the child and communicate your concerns.

References

- 1 Child Welfare Information Gateway. Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect. Accessible online at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/define.pdf>
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- 3 The National Traumatic Stress Network. Accessible online at <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/physical-abuse>
- 4 The VIRTUS Programs. *Protecting God's Children*. Version 4.0 (2021).
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- 7 Fast Facts: Preventing Child Abuse & Neglect. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Accessible online at <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/fastfact.html#:~:text=Physical%20abuse%20is%20the%20intentional,to%20engage%20in%20sexual%20acts>.
- 8 https://www.virtusonline.org/virtus/Abuse_Reporting.cfm .

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