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Child Abuse: What Every Parent Should Know

Nearly all mothers and fathers can point to incidents in which they fell short of their ideal as parents—perhaps a moment of frustration in which they believed they were somehow abusive to their youngsters when, in retrospect, they really hadn't been. Most parents will never actually be child abusers, and most children will never be abused.

By definition, child abuse includes a number of forms of severe maltreatment, including physical abuse, physical neglect, verbal abuse, **emotional** abuse, and **sexual abuse**. Some unfortunate children experience multiple types of abuse. For instance, a child who experiences repeated instances of emotional abuse might also be victimized by occasional, deliberate physical **violence**. Severe physical abuse—even if only a rare outburst by overwhelmed parents with out-of-control anger—can inflict permanent damage on children and, in some cases, death.



Parental neglect—in which a child receives little or no supervision in and around his home, for example—can have tragic consequences if injuries occur. Even when it poses no immediate threat to a child's **safety**, prolonged or repeated neglect—in which his basic needs for clothing, nutrition, medical care, education, shelter, and nurturance are not met—can have adverse physical, social, developmental, and emotional consequences.

The number of cases of child abuse is on the rise, with reports of abuse to child-protection agencies increasing dramatically in recent years. According to one study there were three reports of child abuse for each one hundred children in the United States in 1985 alone. With societal **drug** and **alcohol** problems so severe, and the number of children in poverty growing, the incidence of child abuse is likely to continue to rise.

Most abusers are members of the child's family—if not a parent, then a close relative (such as an uncle or an older brother or sister), or a member of the household. And a number of factors can contribute to their abuse of children. Pressures on the family, both internal and external, can take a toll. When parents are feeling financial strain, job stress, or **marital problems**, their anger and frustration may make them more prone to strike out at their child. At certain times of the day—perhaps in the early evening after a hard day at work—parents may find it particularly difficult to control their tempers when youngsters misbehave or merely try their patience. Parents, who are socially isolated, without adequate sources of emotional support or a helping hand with daily tasks and responsibilities, are more likely to lose control and abuse their children.

Alcohol and other drug use by parents is often a contributor to child abuse. By reducing inhibitions, alcohol consumption often allows anger to explode in a parent who is confronted by his or her child's misbehavior. Some drugs, such as amphetamines, can increase agitation and thus can contribute to an abusive situation in the home. Children who are abused are sometimes those with learning or **behavioral problems**—conditions that themselves place more stress on and create more conflict within the family.

Physical Abuse

Parents who were physically abused themselves as children, or who were or are intimidated verbally and physically by adults around them, often resort to similar means when they **discipline** their own youngsters.

The use of force, especially violence toward other people, is a behavior learned from parents and inflicted on children. And when life stresses—from poverty to illness to alcoholism—exist, they increase the risk of abuse. Some abused children live in families replete with domestic violence—where spouses have physical battles and wives are often beaten.

If you suspect that a child you know is being abused—perhaps a niece or a nephew, a child in the neighborhood, or a classmate of your youngster—you have a responsibility to become involved. Teachers are often the first to see the changes in a child's physical appearance, emotional condition, and behavior, changes that suggest she is being hurt or is in trouble. In many states, teachers (as well as physicians, dentists, and other professionals) are legally obligated to report suspected cases of abuse—and for good reason: Every year, children die from abuse, often even after someone became aware that they were being victimized.

Use some common sense in trying to determine whether a child is actually being physically abused. For instance, normal, active children have some **bruises and bumps** that come from everyday playing. However, these routine bruises tend to occur over bony areas such as knees, elbows, and shins. If you see a child who has injuries on other parts of the body—the stomach, the cheeks, the ears, the buttocks, the mouth, or the thighs—this should raise your suspicions. Black eyes, human bite marks, and burns in the shape of round cigarette butts are not symptoms of everyday play.

In the overwhelming majority of child-abuse cases, parents do not consciously intend to injure their children. Most abusive episodes arise when adults have difficulty coping with life situations and lose control. However, even if their intentions are not malicious, a parent who abuses a child may do it again, especially if his or her underlying stresses are not addressed. As a result, society often has to intervene in order to protect the child and assist the family.

Once a case has been investigated by law enforcement and social agencies, local social service bureaus may institute various forms of services and treatment to help the family. However, the safety and protection of the child are the first priority, and thus children are sometimes removed from their family and placed in a foster home, at least temporarily; at the same time, efforts are made to work with the parents to address underlying problems and teach them coping skills to ensure that episodes of abuse are not repeated. If you have abused your own child or feel that such behavior may occur, talk with a trusted individual such as a physician or a clergyman. He or she may refer you to a professional or an agency where you can obtain help, including assistance in dealing with your own fears and guilt.

Both parents and children may benefit from some guidance and counseling, individually and together, perhaps at shelters for domestic violence that can help break the cycle. You will be guided toward dealing with your emotions without resorting to violence. You will have the opportunity to discuss your own parenting experiences and your current life stresses. You will be shown ways to cope effectively with stresses so that you do not fall into inflicting injuries upon your youngster. You have a responsibility to your child and to yourself to find ways to relate at home that are nonviolent, day after day.

If you feel that you are in the midst of a crisis, call your local chapter of **Parents Anonymous** or a crisis hotline, which can provide you with some prompt support. Thereafter, the more formal treatment process should begin.

Finally, you might also get involved to help reduce the incidence of child abuse in your community at large. You can become an advocate for a caring and respectful environment for all children. True, some segments of society still condone corporal punishment and even outwardly abusive behavior toward children—but this is wrong. You can work with local schools to eliminate physical punishment and to promote and teach constructive ways to deal with anger and conflict.

Emotional Abuse

Not all abuse is physical. Neglecting your child's needs for emotional support, love, and caring is also a form of abuse. Emotional abuse is one of the most pervasive and damaging forms of child abuse. Belittling, ridiculing, name calling, and being disrespectful and unreasonably critical toward your youngster can have serious emotional consequences and long-term repercussions. Like more violent forms of abuse, emotional abuse can impair your child's self-image and **self-esteem** and interfere with his ability to function well in society. He may have difficulty making friends and relating to peers. In fact, he may avoid participating in activities with other children, and being in situations in which he's required to give and receive affection. Instead, he may be prone to being aggressive and oppositional. He might also develop learning difficulties or hyperactivity or have problems such as bed-wetting or soiling. Or he might act "pseudo mature," becoming a caretaker for adults and others far beyond roles appropriate for his age and development.

When this emotional abuse occurs, especially repeatedly over an extended period of time, it can have a lifelong impact, affecting a youngster's happiness, relationships, and success. He may become somber, unable to enjoy himself, and prone to self-defeating behaviors. At the extreme, he can become self-destructive, engaging in **self-mutilation** and even attempting

suicide.

As with other types of abuse, emotional abuse is often inflicted by parents who themselves were raised in an environment where they experienced emotional mistreatment by their own mothers and fathers. Being made aware of the way they are treating their children is an important first step for these parents in bringing their abusive behavior to a halt. Often they are not conscious that their behavior is damaging; if they knew what they were doing and were more sensitive to their child's pain, they would probably want to do something to stop it.

Visiting a physician or a clergyman is a good way to start looking for help with emotional abuse. You might be referred to a mental-health professional or to community organizations or churches that offer parenting classes aimed specifically at helping you talk to and problem-solve with your child.

Signs of Physical Abuse

These indicators may suggest a youngster has been physically abused:

- The child has had repeated injuries that are unexplainable or unusual.
- He appears withdrawn, passive, depressed, and cries a lot.
- Conversely, he is unusually aggressive, disruptive in the classroom, or destructive of his personal property and that of others. He throws toys across the room or becomes violent toward a pet.
- He seems overly tired and mentions that he has trouble **sleeping** and frequent nightmares.
- The child seems genuinely afraid of a parent or other caretaker.
- He spends a lot of time at the playground and appears hesitant to go home after school, as if he were fearful of something there.
- His parents seem to be isolated from other mothers and fathers in the neighborhood, do not participate in school activities, and may have a drinking or other drug-abuse problem. They appear preoccupied with their own lives at the expense of caring properly for their youngster.
- The parent is unwilling to talk about his child's injuries, or is noticeably anxious when he or she does so.

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