

## Resource Article

# Child Abuse

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Child abuse occurs in all types of families, communities, and societies. Different countries may have different understandings of child abuse, but it always has a devastating impact on the victims. It affects their lives in the present and in the future. The risk of being abused is greater for younger children, females, orphans, children in group homes or foster care, and children with disabilities.

### Impact of Child Abuse

A child or teen who has been abused may suffer from the following:

- Physical injury
- Intense feelings of fear, guilt, or worthlessness
- Delayed development or disability
- Difficulty trusting adults
- Antisocial behaviors, such as aggression and poor school attendance
- Compliant behaviors, increasing the risk of further exploitation
- Depression
- Substance and alcohol abuse
- Poor relationships
- Suicidal thoughts
- Eating disorders

### Categories of Abuse

A child or teen may be abused physically, sexually, or emotionally. A neglected child or teen is also being abused. Almost all at-risk children and teens suffer from 1 or more types of abuse.

**Physical abuse:** You cannot always tell if a child or teen has been abused. Signs of abuse may be as simple as marks on the skin. Look for injuries with no reasonable explanation. For example, the child has a broken arm, or a teen has bruises on his face and his explanation for the injury does not make sense.

**Sexual abuse:** Sexual abuse is when a child or young teen participates in sexual activities that she does not fully understand. Sometimes she is forced to participate. Even if she agrees, she does not understand what she is agreeing to. Sexual abuse includes fondling a child as well as engaging in sexual acts. Involving a child or teen in prostitution, using a child or teen to make pornography, and allowing a child or teen to watch sexual acts are also sexual abuse.

**Neglect abuse:** Neglect is when an adult fails to provide a child or teen with his basic needs. These basic needs include food, shelter, medical care, safety, education, appropriate touch, and attention. A young person needs all of these in order to grow into a healthy adult.

**Emotional abuse:** Emotional abuse is difficult to detect, identify, and stop. It is often accompanied by other abuses. Emotional abuse happens when a child or teen is threatened, isolated, or does not receive appropriate affection.

# Indicators of Abuse

**Sharing:** The victim or the abuser shares information about the abuse

**Physical indicators:** Bruises, periods of unconsciousness, welts, fractures, abdominal injuries, internal injuries, bite marks, and head injuries

**Behavioral signs:** Fear of adults, aggression, bedwetting, stealing or scavenging food, unexplained headaches, stomachaches, sudden change of moods, difficulty sleeping, and low self-esteem

**Learning problems:** Not doing well at school, including poor concentration

**Sexual indicators:** Injuries to genitals, breasts, or buttocks; itching, soreness, discharge, bleeding, or pain in the same areas; frequent urination; the presence of a sexually transmitted disease

**Developmentally inappropriate sexual behavior:** Overattentiveness to the opposite sex, displaying genitals, and inappropriate knowledge of sexual facts

**Developmental delay:** A delay in 1 or more developmental areas

**Neglect:** Cold hands and feet, blotchy skin, listless appearance, poor hygiene habits, and chronic tiredness

**Self-comforting behaviors:** Thumb-sucking, rocking, masturbation, and head-banging

## What Can You Do about Abuse?

Knowing the symptoms will help you to be more aware. If you are working with children as a volunteer or a professional, find out about your church or organization's child protection policy. If your group does not have one, encourage the leadership to develop a policy. Be sure that everyone who interacts with the children or teens has read it and complies with it.

Provide opportunities for creativity to encourage children and teens to express their feelings. If a child draws a picture that is dark, angry, or suggestive, ask him to explain it to you. If you see a teen touching others inappropriately during a classroom activity, invite her to speak with you after class. Report any abuse to the appropriate authorities if possible.

For children, a consistent routine creates feelings of safety and security. For teens, maintaining an environment of respect for others encourages sharing.

Children and youth are our most vulnerable citizens and have a right to be protected from abuse and exploitation. It is the responsibility of every parent, ministry, organization, and government to create safe places for them.