

What You Need to Know About Child Abuse and Neglect

Our goal will always be to prevent child abuse before it ever occurs. That said, adults still need to be vigilant to protect children from abuse. As a parent, you are in a great position to watch and protect your own children, your children's friends, and other children you know. By knowing the signs and definitions of abuse, you can help a child be responding to any suspicions you might have.

Your Role in Protecting Children

North Carolina law requires all adults to report suspected child maltreatment. You do not need proof that maltreatment has occurred; you only need reasonable cause to suspect maltreatment. You do not need anyone's permission to file a report. You can report anonymously; even if you give your name, it will not be revealed. Remember, it is your job as an adult to help protect children.

What is Child Maltreatment?

Maltreatment comes in four forms: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect.

Physical Maltreatment

Physical Abuse is defined as serious injury inflicted by or allowed by a parent/caregiver or substantial risk to a child by non-accidental means. Signs of possible physical maltreatment include:

- Unexplained bruises in various states of healing.
- Self-destructive behaviors such as hitting or biting oneself.
- Welts, bite marks, bald spots.
- Unexplained burns, especially burns that resemble cigarette burns or glove-like burns on the hands.
- Unexplained fractures, abrasions, or wounds.
- Expression of unusual fear of parent/caregiver.

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is the expression of attitudes or behaviors toward a child that may create serious emotional or psychological damage. Signs of possible emotional abuse include:

- Speech disorders, developmental delays.
- Ulcers, asthma, severe allergies.
- Habit disorders including thumb sucking or rocking.
- Extreme passive or aggressive behavior.
- Very low self-esteem, antisocial, or destructive actions.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is any behavior of a sexual nature imposed on a child including fondling, masturbation, oral sex, vaginal or anal penetration (by a finger, penis or object), exhibitionism, child pornography, and suggestive behavior or comments. Signs of possible sexual abuse include:

- Engagement in sexual behaviors that are not developmentally appropriate.
- A detailed and sophisticated understanding of sexual behaviors.
- Regression to behaviors such as thumb-sucking or limited speech.
- Pain, itching, bruising, or bleeding in the genital area.
- Delinquent or aggressive behavior, depression, or suicide attempts.
- Substance abuse, self-mutilation, promiscuity, running away.

Neglect

Neglect is any serious disregard for a child's supervision, care or discipline. Signs of possible neglect include:

- Reported abandonment by parent/caregiver.
- Unattended medical needs, lack of supervision.
- Consistent hunger, inappropriate dress, poor hygiene.
- Lice, distended stomach, poor social skills, begging or stealing food.
- Frequent absences or tardiness at school.
- Extreme fatigue or falling asleep in class.

Whom should you call?

Call your local county Department of Social Services (DSS) and ask to speak with a social worker. Share any information you have about the child – name, age, address and parent or caregiver name – and what makes you suspect abuse.

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What happens after you report?

If your report is accepted for assessment, DSS will initiate an assessment within 24 hours for abuse or 72 hours for neglect. The assessment will include a visit to the home and interviews with the child, his or her family and others. DSS will work to protect the child while helping the family address issues that may be contributing to the abusive or neglectful behavior. Families most frequently work with DSS to receive services in the form of counseling, emergency foster care, help with basic needs, parenting classes, and intensive in-home services. If you disagree with DSS' decision, you can request a review of the case by the District Attorney.

To prevent abuse and neglect, you can:

- Be a nurturing parent!
- Help a friend, neighbor, or relative who is having trouble with family.
- Educate parents you know about healthy child development or healthy parenting.
- Get involved – advocate for services that help families.
- Volunteer at a local child maltreatment prevention program.
- Help develop parenting resources at your local library.
- Ask for help for yourself.
- Tell parents in your community that parenting is hard.
- Offer your support to parents in your community.