

How To Identify Child Abuse and What To Do About It

By Joe Talent

All parents love their children and want the best life has in store for them. However, sometimes parents will lose sight of how to help their children develop into responsible adults and allow their emotions to stand in the way of making good decisions as parents. The following information is intended to help the public understand where the line stands between strict parenting and child abuse. Children should not live in fear of their parents; loving parents should guide them.

What is child abuse?

Although there are many formal and acceptable definitions of child abuse, the following is offered as a guide. Child abuse consists of any act of commission or omission that endangers or impairs a child's physical or emotional health and development. Child abuse includes any damage done to a child which cannot be reasonably explained and which is often represented by an injury or series of injuries appearing to be non-accidental in nature.

Major forms of child abuse

Physical abuse - Any non-accidental injury to a child. This includes hitting, kicking, slapping, shaking, burning, pinching, hair pulling, biting, choking, throwing, shoving, whipping, and paddling.

Emotional abuse - Any attitude or behavior that interferes with a child's mental health or social development. This includes yelling, screaming, name-calling, shaming, negative comparisons to others, telling them they are "bad, no good, worthless" or "a mistake."

Sexual abuse - Any sexual act between an adult and a child. This includes fondling, penetration, intercourse, exploitation, pornography, exhibitionism, child prostitution, group sex, oral sex, or forced observation of sexual acts.

Neglect - Physical - Failure to provide for a child's physical needs. This includes lack of supervision, inappropriate housing or shelter, inadequate provision of food, inappropriate clothing for season or weather, abandonment, denial of medical care, and inadequate hygiene.

Neglect - Emotional - Failure to provide affection and support necessary for the development of the emotional, social, physical and intellectual well being of a child. This includes ignoring, a lack of appropriate physical affection (hugs), not saying, "I love you," withdrawal of attention, a lack of praise, and a lack of positive reinforcement.

Who inflicts the abuse?

Child abusers are found among all socio-economic, religious and ethnic groups and are most often ordinary people who are trapped in a stressful life situation with which they cannot cope satisfactorily.

A child abuser is usually a person closely related to the child, such as a parent, stepparent or other caretaker. The child abuser is seldom a total stranger.

If you suspect a child is being abused:

Learn the reporting agency for your geographic area and situation. This is frequently a law enforcement agency (police or sheriff's department), and/or the local child welfare or social services agency. Suspicion of abuse is all that is necessary to file a report. Your information can be given anonymously. Information that will be most helpful includes the child's name, age, address, gender, school attended (if possible), and names of parents. Upon receiving your information, the child welfare agency should determine the appropriate course of action.