

Watch, Listen and Act for Those Who Can't

Child abuse is unquestionably one of the most tragic and heartbreaking crimes that we encounter. As responsible adults, we feel compelled to protect children and do whatever we can to correct abusive activity when we see it committed. This attitude is completely appropriate, and even expected of adults that interact with children on a regular basis. Unfortunately, there have been many instances in which overenthusiastic adults with little knowledge of a specific situation have caused pain to a family by acting on suspicions of abuse.

Mistaking normal activity as evidence of abuse is very dangerous, for a child and his parents alike, but failing to recognize legitimate signals of abuse is just as dangerous. We can all do our part to protect the most innocent and vulnerable members of our communities by educating ourselves about the warning signs of child abuse.

Physical Abuse Signals

Physical abuse is the form that leaves the most immediately recognizable signs. A child that has suffered physical abuse will likely display unusual bruises or other marks of injury—that is, ones that you would not expect to result from typical accidents. A mark may be evidence of abuse if:

- The child tries to hide it, lies about it, or seems embarrassed about it.
- When asked, parent or guardian becomes defensive or self-conscious about it. If the mark was a result of an unforeseen accident, a parent is usually willing and even eager to make that fact clear to other adults to avoid suspicion of child abuse.
- Other marks appear, reflecting possible ongoing abuse.

Physical abuse is complicated by the factor of corporal punishment—spanking or other forms of discipline that use physical pain to reinforce a parent's authority. These forms are completely legal and appropriate, but there is understandable confusion in the minds of many as to where the line between appropriate and inappropriate punishment lies. Adults must do their best to respect parents' rights to discipline their children as they see fit while still intervening if physical abuse becomes a problem.



RESOURCES

National Movement for America's Children:

www.preventchildabuse.org

Childhelp:

www.childhelp.org

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Child Welfare Information Gateway:

www.childwelfare.gov

>INFOCUS

HOW TO TELL IF A
CHILD IS BEING ABUSED
(AND WHAT TO
DO ABOUT IT)



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Emotional Abuse Signals

The marks of emotional abuse are obviously more difficult to discern than those of physical abuse. Although a broad generalization, perhaps the most helpful guideline for adults is to look for behavior and attitudes that are simply not normal for a child's age. Of course, every child is unique, and a child may move ahead or lag behind others his age in development and maturity. But behavior that is dramatically different from what we normally expect to see from a child could be a signal that they are suffering emotional abuse, which skews development and could lead to serious psychological problems later in life.

Some examples of these types of unusual behavior are:

- Rejection of contact with others and inability to relate to others normally
- Fear of adults
- Bullying or exercising authority over other children
- A child's sudden departure from their typical personality



Sometimes it is easier to discern emotional abuse when interacting with the parents or caregivers of a child. Emotionally abusive adults often show a lack of normal concern for a child, describe them in unhealthy terms, have little esteem for them, or openly criticize them in front of others.

Sexual Abuse Signals

Sexual abuse is the most difficult form to talk about, address, or even consider. The loss of innocence on the part of a child is an enormous tragedy, but it is more common than any of us would expect. Sexually abused children need the help of alert, sensitive adults who are willing to do their part to remove a child from dangerous situations. These adults should know what their roles are in the process.

Signs of sexual abuse may include:

- Seemingly unfounded fear of specific adults, or of adults in general
- Signs of physical abuse that suggest sexual contact by an adult
- Excessive interest in sexuality and/or unusual knowledge of sexual information

It is helpful for adults to know that in many cases a sexually abused child considers himself at fault for the abuse. Thus, shame and fear causes the child to avoid talking about it and prompts him to conceal the abuse as much as possible. Counseling a child about sexual abuse is an extremely sensitive activity and is most effective when the counselor possesses specific training and education about the best approach.

What to Do About It

When an adult observes or suspects that child abuse of a physical, emotional, or sexual nature is occurring, it is critical that the adult follow the correct legal procedures to report it. Direct intervention by an unqualified adult can lead to a lawsuit or even increased abuse of the child in question. Social workers with state Protective Services are capable of and legally qualified to confront abusive parents, guardians, and family members, even removing children from abusive homes if the evidence warrants it. An adult who feels compelled to address abuse should refer the case to the appropriate local authorities. Of course, if you believe a child is in immediate danger, your first call should be to the police.

Some people avoid reporting suspected abuse because they are afraid the action could result in legal action or danger to themselves by angry abusive adults. Most states allow anonymous reporting of abuse, ensuring that a reporter faces no repercussions. Some professions that involve child care require reporting of suspected child abuse. These adults risk legal consequences if they fail to report signs of abuse that they observe, or should have observed.

It is important to recognize that many abusive adults are victims of abuse. A parent who grew up in an unfortunate home situation, or who currently feels rejected by those around them, is more likely to take out his or her frustrations on children, vulnerable subjects for vented anger and depression. By reaching out to parents of children and including them as members of a caring community, we can all help to prevent child abuse before it occurs.

More than five children a day die as a result of child abuse.

