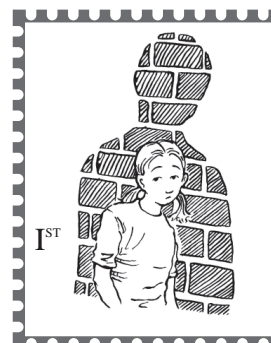


# Child abuse and neglect: the emotional effects

## Factsheet for parents and teachers

### About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet looks at what child abuse is and the harm it can cause, and offers practical help about how to detect it and where to get help.



## Introduction

### What is child abuse?

All parents upset their children sometimes. Saying 'no' and managing difficult behaviour is an essential part of parenting. Tired or stressed parents can lose control and can do or say something they regret, and may even hurt the child. If this happens often enough, it can **seriously** harm the child. That is why **abuse** is defined in law. The Children Act 1989 states that abuse should be considered to have happened when someone's actions have caused a child to suffer **significant harm** to their health or development.

**Significant harm** means that someone is:

- punishing a child too much
- hitting or shaking a child
- constantly criticising, threatening or rejecting a child
- sexually interfering with or assaulting a child
- not looking after a child – not giving them enough to eat, ignoring them, not playing or talking with them or not making sure that they are safe.

### Who abuses children?

Children are usually abused by someone in their immediate family circle. This can include parents, brothers or sisters, babysitters or other familiar adults. It is quite unusual for strangers to be involved.

### How can you tell if a child is being abused?

**Physically abused** children may be:

- watchful, cautious or wary of adults
- unable to play and be spontaneous

- aggressive or abusive
- bullying other children or being bullied themselves
- unable to concentrate, underachieving at school and avoiding activities that involve removal of clothes, e.g. sports
- having temper tantrums and behaving thoughtlessly
- lying, stealing, truanting from school and getting into trouble with the police
- finding it difficult to trust other people and make friends.

**Sexually abused** children may:

- suddenly behave differently when the abuse starts
- think badly of themselves
- not look after themselves
- use sexual talk or ideas in their play that you would usually see only in someone much older
- withdraw into themselves or be secretive
- under-achieve at school
- start wetting or soiling themselves
- be unable to sleep
- behave in an inappropriately seductive or flirtatious way
- be fearful, frightened of physical contact
- become depressed and take an overdose or harm themselves
- run away, become promiscuous or take to prostitution
- drink too much or start using drugs
- develop an eating disorder such as anorexia or bulimia.

**Emotionally abused or neglected** children may:

- be slow to learn to walk and talk
- be very passive and unable to be spontaneous
- have feeding problems and grow slowly
- find it hard to develop close relationships

- be over-friendly with strangers
- get on badly with other children of the same age
- be unable to play imaginatively
- think badly of themselves
- be easily distracted and do badly at school.

It can be hard to detect **long-standing abuse** by an adult the child is close to. It is often very difficult for the child to tell anyone about it, as the abuser may have threatened to hurt them if they tell anybody. A child may not say anything because they think it is their fault, that no one will believe them or that they will be teased or punished. The child may even love the abusing adult – they want the abuse to stop, but they don't want the adult to go to prison or for the family to break up.

If you suspect that a child is being abused, you may be able to help them to talk about it. Your local Social Services Child Protection Adviser will be able to offer more detailed advice.

## Where can I get help?

First and foremost, the child must be protected from further abuse. Social Services will need to be involved to find out:

- what has happened
- if it is likely to happen again
- what steps are needed to protect the child.

## Child Protection

After investigation, Social Services may be satisfied that the problems have been sorted out, and that the parents can now care for and protect the child properly. If so, they will remain involved only if the family wants their help. If Social Services are concerned that a child is being harmed, they will arrange a child protection case conference. The parents and professionals who know the child will be invited. A plan will be made to help the child and family and ensure that there is no further harm.

## Help to look after the child

When a child has been abused within the family, the person involved is sometimes able to own up to what they have done and wants help. They can then be helped to look after their child better. Occasionally, the child may have to be taken

## Sources of further information

- ChildLine provides a free and confidential service for children. Helpline 0800 1111; [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk).
- The NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) has a number of useful publications. Child Protection Helpline 0800 800 500; Welsh textphone 0808 100 12524 (alternatively, the NSPCC run Asian helplines in five languages); [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk).
- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel. 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; fax 020 7245 1231; e-mail: [booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk](mailto:booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk), or you can download them from [www.rcpsych.ac.uk](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk).

away from the abusing adult because the risks of physical and emotional harm are too great. This can be for a short time, until things become safer, or may be permanent.

## Specialist treatment

Many children need specialist treatment because of the abuse they have endured. Some receive help from family centres run by social services. If they are worried, depressed or being very difficult, the child and family might need help from the local child and adolescent mental health service. These specialists may work with the whole family, or with children and adolescents alone. Sometimes they work with teenagers in groups. Individual therapy can be especially helpful for children who have been sexually abused, or who have experienced severe trauma. Children who have suffered serious abuse or neglect can be difficult to care for, and the service can offer help and advice to parents and carers.

## References

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