

# Child Abuse and Neglect

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Every year, hundreds of thousands of children throughout the United States experience abuse and neglect. This is a tragedy that can happen anywhere, affects all of us and has severe consequences.

## What is child abuse?

Child abuse is usually repeated mistreatment or neglect of a child by parents or other guardians resulting in injury or harm. There are three types. *Physical abuse* is harmful acts directed at children, including shaking, beating, burning or any other non-accidental injury. Severe abuse may result in major injury, permanent physical or developmental damage, or even death. *Sexual abuse* consists of a range of sexual behavior, including fondling and masturbation. It can also involve children in pornography. *Emotional abuse* includes verbal assault, blaming, criticizing, belittling, rejecting a child, or constantly treating siblings unequally. Emotional abuse causes harm to a child's psychological capacity, emotional stability and social competence.

## What is child neglect?

Neglect is the failure to meet a child's basic needs. There are four types. *Physical neglect* is inadequate and/or unsafe supervision of a child. *Medical neglect* is failure to seek needed medical attention for a child and withholding of medically indicated treatment including appropriate nutrition, hydration and medication. *Educational neglect* is failure to abide by state laws regarding children's compulsory education. *Emotional neglect* is ignoring a child's social-emotional developmental needs.

## Why do parents abuse their children?

It is difficult to imagine that any person would intentionally harm a child. Many times physical abuse is a result of inappropriate or excessive physical discipline and lack of awareness of the magnitude of force applied.

People who were victims of abuse themselves are also more likely to be abusive too. For them it is simply the way they were raised and the only childrearing practice they are familiar with.

Lack of parenting knowledge, unrealistic expectations of children, frequent family crises, poverty, physical disabilities, stress, lack of community support systems, substance abuse, mental health problems and domestic and other violence in the household are risk factors contributing to child abuse and neglect.

## What are the consequences of child abuse and neglect?

Research and evidence show that abuse and neglect are associated with both short and long-term negative consequences for children's physical and mental health, cognitive skills, educational achievement, and social and behavioral development.

Abused children are likely to have more physical injuries and medical problems such as chronic pain, abdominal complaints, asthma, eating disorders, insomnia and neurological symptoms. They may also become depressed or self-destructive and may even attempt suicide. And abused children are also more likely to become abusers and be involved in violent criminal activities later in life.


## What does the law say?

Every state has laws mandating the reporting of child abuse and neglect. In California, certain professionals, including child care and health care providers, are required by law to report known or suspected cases of child abuse and/or neglect. Although the primary purpose of the reporting law is to protect the child, it may also provide intervention opportunities for other children or adults in the home who are unable to ask for help directly.

## How can you help?

Child abuse is a vicious cycle and a symptom of parental problems. It does not simply go away if ignored, and cannot be treated by punishing the parents. By learning the facts about child abuse, helping or seeking support for troubled families and reporting child abuse when you see it, you can help to protect children and assist families in learning how to live together and cope with crises more appropriately.

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**Provided by California Childcare Health Program**  
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