

What is child abuse?

“Child abuse” includes physical, emotional and sexual abuse and/or neglect. It also addresses a pattern of abuse and risks of harm. Some definitions include:

Physical abuse is any deliberate physical force or action, by a parent or caregiver, which results, or could result, in injury to a child. It can include bruising, cuts, punching, slapping, beating, shaking, burning, biting or throwing a child. Using belts, sticks or other objects to punish a child can cause serious harm and is also considered abuse.

Neglect occurs when a caregiver fails to provide basic needs such as adequate food, sleep, safety, education, clothing or medical treatment. It also includes leaving a child alone or failing to provide adequate supervision. If the caregiver is unable to provide the child with basic needs due to financial inability, it is not considered neglect, unless relief has been offered and refused.

Emotional abuse is a pattern of behaviour that attacks a child’s emotional development and sense of self-worth. It includes excessive, aggressive or unreasonable demands that place expectations on a child beyond his or her capacity. Emotional abuse includes constantly criticizing, teasing, belittling, insulting, rejecting, ignoring or isolating the child. It may also include exposure to domestic violence.

Sexual abuse occurs when a child is used for the sexual gratification of an adult or an older child. The child may cooperate out of fear or because they want to please the adult. Sexual abuse does not need to include physical contact between the perpetrator and the child. It may include activities such as sexual intercourse, exposing a child’s genitals, obscene phone calls, text messages, or digital interaction, fondling for sexual purposes, watching a

child undress for sexual pleasure, encouraging/forcing a child to look at or perform in pornographic pictures or videos, and child sex trafficking.

THE SUBTLE SIGNS OF CHILD ABUSE

While a single sign listed below doesn't necessarily mean abuse or neglect is occurring, it can be an indication that something is wrong. If multiple signs are being exhibited, the child may be at risk of abuse or neglect. Please contact your [local Children's Aid Society](#) if you have concerns about a child or youth.

Physical abuse is when a child is injured or harmed by his or her caregiver, or when the caregiver fails to do something to protect the child.

Subtle signs of physical abuse may include (but are not limited to):

- Child wears long sleeves/long pants even in warm weather
- Excessive crying
- Child seems anxious when other children cry
- Avoidance of physical contact with others
- Recurrent nightmares or disturbed sleep patterns
- Behaviour extremes—aggressiveness or withdrawal
- Poor self-concept
- Whispered speech
- Loss of appetite for no apparent reason, or excessive appetite
- Child is wary of adults
- Re-enactment of abuse using dolls, drawings or friends
- Clinging
- Delinquent behaviour
- Abrupt decline in school performance

Emotional abuse is when a caregiver treats a child in an extremely negative way that damages self-esteem and the concept of self.

Subtle signs of emotional abuse may include (but are not limited to):

- Sudden change in self-confidence
- Headaches or stomach aches with no medical cause
- Destructive behaviour
- Abnormal fears, increased nightmares
- Failure to gain weight (especially in infants)
- Desperately affectionate behaviour
- Speech disorders (stuttering, stammering)
- Habit disorders (biting, rocking, head-banging)
- Argumentative or consistent temper tantrums
- Bullying tactics
- Being easily frustrated
- Behaviour extremes—disobedient or overly compliant

Sexual abuse is any sexual exploitation of a child by a caregiver or someone else.

Subtle signs of sexual abuse may include (but are not limited to):

- Frequent sore throats or urinary infections
- Constant sadness
- Re-enactment of abuse using dolls, drawings or friends
- Clinging
- Thumb-sucking
- Sudden fear of the dark
- Behaviour extremism—aggressiveness or withdrawal
- Recurrent nightmares or disturbed sleep patterns

- Loss of appetite for no apparent reason, or excessive appetite
- Bedwetting
- Avoidance of undressing or wearing extra layers of clothes
- Abrupt decline in school performance

Neglect is a pattern where a child's caregiver fails to provide basic needs such as food, sleep, safety, supervision, appropriate clothing or medical treatment.

Subtle signs of neglect may include (but are not limited to):

- Missing key articles of clothing
- Over- or under-dressed for weather conditions
- Height and weight significantly below age level
- Consistent school absenteeism
- Persistent hunger
- Trouble concentrating
- Low self-esteem
- Body odour
- Child assumes adult responsibilities
- Always being dirty and severely unkempt
- Sleepiness/always tired
- Child steals food/lunch money from others