

Chapter 4: Protecting Children



Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect

When children are nurtured, they can grow up to be happy and healthy adults. But when they lack an attachment to a caring adult, receive inconsistent nurturing, or experience harsh discipline, the consequences can affect their lifelong health, well-being, and relationships with others.

This chapter provides information to help service providers and others concerned about the health and well-being of children to understand child abuse and neglect, its effects, and what each of us can do to address it when it occurs.

What Is Child Abuse and Neglect?

Child abuse or neglect often takes place in the home at the hands of a person the child knows well—a parent, relative, babysitter, or friend of the family. There are four major types of child maltreatment. Although any of the forms may be found separately, they often occur together.

Each State is responsible for establishing its own definitions of child abuse and neglect that meet Federal minimum standards. Most include the following:

- **Neglect** is failure to provide for a child's basic needs.
- **Physical abuse** is physical injury as a result of hitting, kicking, shaking, burning, or otherwise harming a child.
- **Sexual abuse** is any situation where a child is used for sexual gratification. This may include indecent exposure, fondling, rape, or commercial exploitation through prostitution or the production of pornographic materials.
- **Emotional abuse** is any pattern of behavior that impairs a child's emotional development or sense of self-worth, including constant criticism, threats, and rejection.

Why Does Child Abuse Occur?

Child abuse and neglect affect children of every age, race, and income level. However, research has identified many factors relating to the child, family, community, and society that are associated with an increased risk of child abuse and neglect. Studies also have shown that when multiple risk factors are present, the risk is greater. Some of the most common risk factors include the following:

- **Immaturity.** Young parents may lack experience with children or be unprepared for the responsibility of raising a child.
- **Unrealistic expectations.** A lack of knowledge about normal child development or behavior may result in frustration and, ultimately, abusive discipline.
- **Stress.** Families struggling with poverty, unstable housing, divorce, or unemployment may be at greater risk.
- **Substance abuse.** The effects of substance use, as well as time, energy, and money spent obtaining drugs or alcohol, significantly impair parents' abilities to care for their children.
- **Intergenerational patterns of abuse.** Parents' own experiences of childhood trauma impact their relationships with their children.
- **Isolation.** Effective parenting is more difficult when parents lack a supportive partner, family, or community.

These circumstances, combined with the inherent challenges of raising children, can result in otherwise well-intentioned parents causing their children harm or neglecting their needs. On the other hand, evidence shows

that the great majority of families who experience these circumstances will not abuse or neglect their children. Protective factors, such as the ones discussed in this guide, act as buffers to help many families who are under stress parent effectively.

How Many Children Are Abused and Neglected in the United States?

In Federal fiscal year (FFY) 2013, the most recent year for which national child maltreatment statistics are available, about 3.5 million reports were made to child protective services concerning the safety and well-being of approximately 6.4 million children.¹ As a result of these reports, a nationally estimated 679,000 (unique count) children were found to be victims of child abuse or neglect. (Unique count is defined as counting each child only once regardless of the number of reports of abuse and neglect.) Of these children, four-fifths (79.5 percent) were neglected, more than 15 percent (18.0 percent) were physically abused, and less than 10 percent (9.0 percent) were sexually abused.

Child deaths are the most tragic results of maltreatment. In FFY 2013, an estimated 1,520 children died due to abuse or neglect. Of the children who died, 71.4 percent suffered neglect and 46.8 percent suffered physical abuse either exclusively or in combination with another maltreatment type.

¹ Statistics on this page are taken from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2014). *Child Maltreatment 2013*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/child-maltreatment-2013>.

What Are the Consequences?

Child maltreatment is a traumatic experience, and the impact on survivors can be profound. Traumatic events, whether isolated (e.g., a single incident of sexual abuse) or ongoing (e.g., chronic emotional abuse or neglect), overwhelm children's ability to cope and elicit powerful physical and emotional responses. These responses continue even when the danger has passed, often until treatment is received.

Traumatic events may impair a child's ability to trust others, sense of personal safety, and effectiveness in navigating life changes. Research shows that child maltreatment, like other trauma, is associated with adverse health and mental health outcomes in children and families, and those negative effects can last a lifetime.

The trauma of child abuse or neglect has been associated with increased risk of:

- Depression and suicide attempts
- Substance abuse
- Developmental disabilities and learning problems
- Social problems with other children and with adults
- Teen pregnancy
- Lack of success in school
- Domestic violence
- Chronic illnesses, including heart disease, cancer, and lung disease, among others

In addition to the impact on the child and family, child abuse and neglect affects the community as a whole—including medical and mental health, law enforcement, judicial, public social services, and nonprofit agencies—as they respond to incidents and support victims. One

analysis of the immediate and long-term economic impact of child abuse and neglect suggests that child maltreatment costs the nation approximately \$220 million every day, or \$80 billion per year.²

What Are the Warning Signs?

The first step in helping or getting help for an abused or neglected child is to identify the symptoms of abuse.

The table on this page lists some symptoms of the four major types of child maltreatment. The presence of a single sign does not prove that child abuse is occurring in a family; however, when these signs appear repeatedly or in combination, you should consider the possibility of maltreatment.

What Can I Do If I Suspect Child Abuse or Neglect?

Anyone can and should report suspected child abuse or neglect. If you think a child is being mistreated, take immediate action.

Most States have a toll-free number for reporting. You also can call the Childhelp® National Child Abuse Hotline at 1.800.4.A.CHILD (1.800.422.4453).

Maltreatment Type	Symptoms
Neglect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signs of malnutrition • Poor hygiene • Unattended physical or medical problems
Physical abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unexplained bruises, burns, or welts • Child appears frightened of a parent or caregiver
Sexual abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pain, bleeding, redness, or swelling in anal or genital area • Age-inappropriate sexual play with toys, self, or others • Age-inappropriate knowledge of sex
Emotional abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extremes in behavior, ranging from overly aggressive to overly passive • Delayed physical, emotional, or intellectual development

² Gelles, R. J., & Perlman, S. (2012). *Estimated annual cost of child abuse and neglect*. Chicago: Prevent Child Abuse America. Retrieved from http://www.preventchildabuse.org/images/research/pcaa_cost_report_2012_gelles_perlman.pdf.

When you call to make a report, you will be asked for specific information, such as:

- The child's name and location
- The name and relationship (if known) of the person you believe is abusing the child
- What you have seen or heard regarding the abuse or neglect
- The names of any other people who might know about the abuse
- Your name and phone number (voluntary)

Reporting the situation may protect the child and get additional help for the family. Many nonprofit, public, education, social service, and child care organizations in your community play a role in providing supports and services to children, youth, and families. Parenting education, crisis/respice care, transitional housing, and literacy programs, as well as family resource centers, teen parent support groups, fatherhood groups, and marriage education classes support families in important ways.

How Can I Help Children Who Have Been Abused or Neglected?

Children who have experienced abuse or neglect need support from caring adults who understand the impact of trauma and how to help. Consider the following suggestions (see the tip sheet, "Helping Your Child Heal From Trauma," on page 59, for more information):

- Help children feel safe. Support them in expressing and managing intense emotions.
- Help children understand their trauma history and current experiences (for example, by helping them understand that what happened was not their fault, or helping them see how their current emotions might be related to past trauma).

- Assess the impact of trauma on the child, and address any trauma-related challenges in the child's behavior, development, and relationships.
- Support and promote safe and stable relationships in the child's life, including supporting the child's family and caregivers if appropriate. Often parents and caregivers have experienced trauma, too. See "Working With Parents Who Have a History of Trauma" on page 38.
- Manage your own stress. Providers who have histories of trauma themselves may be at particular risk.
- Refer the child to trauma-informed services, which may be more effective than generic services that do not address trauma.

On the Child Welfare Information Gateway Website

Find more information about:

- Definitions of child abuse and neglect:
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/defining/>
- Risk and protective factors for child abuse:
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/factors/>
- How many children are abused:
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/statistics/can/>
- Consequences of child abuse and neglect:
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/impact/>
- Warning signs:
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/identifying/>
- Responding to child abuse and neglect:
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/responding/>

Working With Parents Who Have a History of Trauma

When working with families who are under stress, it is important to consider how past trauma may be affecting the parents. Many parents who seek assistance from community agencies or come to the attention of the child welfare system have experienced some form of trauma. This might include living through or witnessing the following:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Chronic neglect
- Family violence
- Community violence

How Does Trauma Affect Parents?

Some parenting behaviors can be misunderstood if not viewed through a “trauma lens.” Parents who have experienced trauma may:

- Have difficulty making decisions that keep their children (and themselves) safe. They may fail to recognize dangerous situations, or they may see danger where it does not exist.
- Find it hard to trust others, resulting in poor relationships with friends and family (including their children). Relationships with people in positions of power (such as caseworkers) may be particularly challenging.
- Cope in unhealthy ways, such as by using drugs or alcohol.

- Have a harder time controlling their emotions, behavior, or words.
- Seem numb or “shut down” and fail to respond to their children when under stress.

How Can You Help?

A good relationship with parents is critical to your ability to help them and their children. Understanding how past trauma may be affecting their behavior will help you earn parents’ trust and increase the potential for a good outcome. Consider the following suggestions:

- Understand that parents’ reactions (including anger, resentment, or avoidance) may be a reaction to trauma. Do not take these behaviors personally.
- Assess a parent’s history to understand how past traumatic experiences may inform current functioning and parenting.
- Refer parents to evidence-based, trauma-informed services whenever appropriate. These will likely be more effective than generic services (such as classes in parenting or anger management) that do not take trauma into account.
- Remember that parents who have experienced trauma are not “bad.” Blaming or judging them is likely to make the situation worse, rather than motivating them to make changes.
- Recognize that all parents want their children to be safe and healthy. Compliment parents’ good decisions and healthy choices, when you see them.

- Stay calm, and keep your voice as neutral and nonthreatening as possible. Model direct and honest communication.
- Establish clear boundaries and expectations. Be consistent. When you make a commitment, follow through.
- Be aware that you could experience secondary/vicarious traumatic stress, which can occur when you see or hear about trauma to others. Take care of yourself and take time to address your own reactions, when you feel you are getting overwhelmed.

Adapted from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Child Welfare Collaborative Group. (2011). *Birth parents with trauma histories in the child welfare system: A guide for child welfare staff*. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

On the Web

For more information, visit:

Trauma-Informed Practice (Information Gateway)

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/responding/trauma/>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

<http://www.nctsn.org/>

Human Trafficking of Children

Human trafficking of children and youth is a growing concern. It occurs when a trafficker uses force, fraud, or coercion to compel another person to engage in commercial sex or work in a form of labor against his or her will. A child under age 18 engaged in commercial sex is a victim of sex trafficking, even if the youth's participation is not forced or coerced.

Although community-based services for family support and child abuse prevention are not specifically designed to respond to child trafficking, many of these providers are encountering children and youth who have been trafficked. In addition, abused and neglected children experience circumstances that can make them more vulnerable to targeting and recruitment by traffickers and pimps.

What Is Human Trafficking?

Cases of human trafficking have been reported in all 50 states. Victims may be U.S. citizens or foreign nationals, male or female; even young children are sometimes victims of trafficking.

Child trafficking may involve the following:

- Prostitution
- Stripping
- Pornography
- Forced begging
- Magazine crews and other door-to-door sales
- Au pairs or nannies
- Domestic work

- Restaurant work
- Hair and nail salons
- Agricultural work
- Drug sales and cultivation

How to Identify a Victim of Human Trafficking

Every human trafficking case is different.

Consider the possibility of human trafficking when a child or youth:

- Fails to attend school regularly or has unexplained absences
- Frequently runs away from home
- Makes references to frequent travel to other cities
- Exhibits bruises or other signs of physical trauma, withdrawn behavior, depression, anxiety, or fear
- Lacks control over his or her schedule and/or identification or travel documents
- Is hungry, malnourished, deprived of sleep, or inappropriately dressed (based on weather conditions or surroundings)
- Shows signs of drug addiction
- Appears to have coached or rehearsed responses to questions

Signs that may indicate **sex trafficking** include the following:

- A sudden change in clothing, personal hygiene, relationships, or possessions

- Behavior that is uncharacteristically promiscuous, or references to sexual situations that are not age appropriate
- A “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” who is noticeably older
- Attempts to conceal recent scars

A victim of **labor trafficking** may:

- Express the need to pay off a debt
- Express concern for family members’ safety
- Work long hours and receive little or no payment
- Care for children not from his or her own family

What to Do If You Suspect a Child Is a Victim of Human Trafficking

It can take a long time to gain a child or youth’s trust and determine whether he or she is being trafficked.

- It’s not your responsibility to make this determination. Report any suspected trafficking to the proper authorities:
 - In an emergency, call your local police department or 911.
 - To report suspected human trafficking crimes or to get help from law enforcement, call U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement at 1.866.347.2423 or submit a tip online at <http://www.ice.gov/tips>.
 - To report suspected trafficking crimes, get help, or learn more about human trafficking from a nongovernmental organization, call the National Human Trafficking Resource Center at 1.888.373.7888 or visit <http://www.traffickingresourcecenter.org>.

- To report sexually exploited or abused minors, call the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children’s (NCMEC) hotline at 1.800.THE.LOST or report incidents online at <http://www.cybertipline.org>.
- Conduct interviews gently and out of the presence of the suspected trafficker(s). Be aware that the child’s parent or caregiver may be the child’s trafficker.
- Use an interpreter if the victim does not speak fluent English. Contact an independent and trusted source for help—do not use relatives, neighbors, or friends of the suspected victim.
- Understand that the child may be reluctant to open up due to fears of retribution by the trafficker or shame about the abuse or the work he or she has been forced to do.
- Trafficked youth may not see themselves as victims and may appear hostile, angry, or protective of their traffickers.
- Be sensitive to cultural and religious differences.
- Avoid questions about immigration; this can be intimidating.

Community Efforts to Respond to Human Trafficking

Victims of trafficking experience complex trauma. Once identified, they are likely to have significant service needs. It is important to provide trauma-informed, culturally appropriate, and individualized care that addresses victims’ physical and mental health.

No single agency, working alone, can successfully combat this issue. Identifying, assessing, protecting, and serving victims of trafficking requires a coordinated approach within and across local, Tribal, State, and Federal levels.

Child welfare and other family support staff must work with law enforcement, juvenile corrections, courts, schools, medical and mental health professionals, child advocacy centers, legal services, crime victim services, and other community and faith-based organizations to formulate a coherent response and minimize further trauma to victims.

ACYF has published *Guidance to States and Services on Addressing Human Trafficking of Children and Youth in the United States*, available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/human-trafficking-guidance>.

For more resources on addressing and responding to human trafficking:

- Responding to Human Trafficking of Children (Child Welfare Information Gateway): <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/responding/collaborative/responding-to-human-trafficking-of-children/>
- Human Trafficking Resource List (Runaway and Homeless Youth Training & Technical Assistance Center): <http://www.rhyttac.net/resources/document/human-trafficking-resource-list>
- National Human Trafficking Resource Center: <http://www.traffickingresourcecenter.org>
- End Trafficking (Administration for Children and Families [ACF]): <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/endtrafficking>
- Anti-Trafficking in Persons Program (Office of Refugee Resettlement): <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/anti-trafficking>
- Anti-Trafficking (Office for Victims of Crime): <https://www.ovcttac.gov/views/HowWeCanHelp/>

[dspHumanTrafficking.cfm](#)

- Human Trafficking in America's Schools (Office of Safe and Healthy Students): <http://0-safesupportivelearning.ed.gov.opac.msmc.edu/human-trafficking-americas-schools>
- Human Trafficking (U.S. Department of Homeland Security): <http://www.dhs.gov/topic/human-trafficking>