



## Understanding and Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect



### What is child abuse and neglect?

The [Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act](#) (CAPTA) defines child abuse and neglect or child maltreatment as:

Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm

- Neglect is a failure to meet the child's basic needs e.g., not providing enough food, shelter or basic supervision, necessary medical or mental health treatment, adequate education or emotional comfort.
- Physical abuse refers to the injury of a child on purpose, e.g., striking, kicking, beating, biting or any action that leads to physical injury.
- Sexual abuse is the use, persuasion, or forcing of a child to engage in sexual acts or imitation of such acts.

### What factors place a child at risk of abuse or neglect?

Abuse and neglect of children occurs in families from all walks of life, of all incomes, religions, and ethnicities. There is no single cause of child maltreatment; rather, it occurs as a result of many forces working together to impact the family.

#### Parent or caregiver risk factors

- Low self-esteem, poor impulse control, depression, anxiety, or antisocial behavior
- Experiencing or witnessing violence as a child, which teaches violent behavior or justifies it as proper behavior
- Substance abuse, which interferes with mental functioning, judgment, self-control, ability to be protective of one's child, and making the child's needs a priority
- Lack of knowledge about normal child development and unrealistic expectations, frustration, and/or inappropriate methods of discipline.

#### Family risk factors

- Children living with single parents are more likely to live in poverty with fewer social supports, which may contribute to stress and increase risks of maltreatment.
- Children in violent homes may witness intimate partner violence, may be victims of physical abuse themselves, and may be neglected by parents or caregivers who are focused on their partners or unresponsive to their children due to their own fears.

- Stressful life events, parenting stress, and emotional distress (e.g., losing a job, physical illness, marital problems, or the death of a family member) may worsen hostility, anxiety, or depression among family members and increase the level of family conflict and maltreatment.
- Maltreating parents or caregivers are less supportive, affectionate, playful, and responsive with their children and are more likely to use harsh discipline and verbal aggression than positive parenting strategies (e.g., using time outs, reasoning, and recognizing and encouraging the child's successes).

#### Child risk factors

- Infants and young children, because they are small and need constant care, are more likely to experience certain forms of maltreatment such as being shaken by parents or caregivers frustrated or overwhelmed by persistent crying. Teenagers, on the other hand, are at greater risk for sexual abuse.
- Children with physical, cognitive, and emotional disabilities or chronic illnesses may be at greater risk of maltreatment. Parents or caregivers of children with disabilities are more likely to experience high levels of stress, depression and anger. Children with disabilities may not understand that abusive behaviors are inappropriate and are unable to defend themselves.
- Aggression, attention deficits, difficult temperaments, and behavior problems in children have been associated with increased risk for maltreatment, especially when parents have poor coping skills, are unable to empathize with the child, or have difficulty controlling emotions. Maltreatment often exacerbates the problem. A physically abused child may develop aggressive behaviors that lead to recurring maltreatment.

#### Environmental risk factors

The vast majority of parents or caregivers who live in these types of environments are not abusive. However, these stresses can increase the risk of abuse for some:

- Poverty and unemployment can increase the likelihood of maltreatment, especially in combination with family stress, depression, substance abuse, and social isolation.
- Parents with less material and emotional support and who do not have positive parenting role models feel less pressure to conform to conventional standards of parenting behaviors.
- Children living in dangerous neighborhoods are at higher risk than children from safer neighborhoods for severe neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. It is possible that violence may seem an acceptable response or behavior to individuals who witness it more frequently.

#### **What are the consequences of child maltreatment?**

Child abuse and neglect can result in physical and psychological developmental delays. A neglectful mother may not feed her baby properly, which can slow brain development, or an emotionally abusive father may damage his child's ability to form trusting relationships. Abused or neglected children can see the world as an unstable, frightening and dangerous place, which can undermine their sense of self-worth and their ability to cope with and adapt to their environments as they grow up. If unaddressed, maltreatment may contribute to later problems, such as alcoholism/substance abuse, depression, domestic violence, multiple sexual partners and exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, suicidal thoughts and attempts.

The impact of abuse can vary depending on:

- Age and developmental status of the child when the abuse or neglect occurred
- Type of abuse (physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, etc.)
- Frequency, duration, and severity of abuse
- Relationship between the victim and his or her abuser

#### **What factors protect a child from risk of abuse or neglect?**

- Children's optimism, high self-esteem, intelligence, creativity, humor, and independence, which enhance their coping skills in the face of adversity
- The acceptance of peers and positive influences such as teachers, mentors, and role models
- The family's access to social supports, neighborhood stability, and access to safe schools and adequate health care
- The child's experience of love, acceptance, positive guidance, and protection from a caring adult, which encourages trust that their parents or caregivers will provide what they need to thrive
- Parent's or caregiver's respectful communication and listening, consistent rules and expectations, and safe opportunities that promote independence
- Parents or caregivers who can cope with the stresses of everyday life and have the inner strength to bounce back when things are not going well.
- Parents or caregivers with a social network of emotionally supportive friends, family, and neighbors
- Families who can meet their own basic needs for food, clothing, housing, and transportation and know how to access essential services such as childcare, health care, and mental health services

#### **What types of prevention are there for child maltreatment?**

Psychologists are heavily involved in the development and implementation of prevention programs for child abuse and neglect. Primary prevention programs raise awareness among the public, service providers, and policymakers about the scope of issues involved in child maltreatment. Secondary prevention programs target populations with one or more risk factors for child maltreatment. Tertiary prevention programs target families where maltreatment has already taken place and aim to reduce the impact and prevent it from reoccurring.

IF YOU SUSPECT SOMEONE IS ABUSING OR NEGLECTING A CHILD, TAKE ACTION:

#### **Child Welfare Information Gateway**

Children's Bureau/ACYF  
1250 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Eighth Floor  
Washington, DC 20024  
(800) 394 3366  
[www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)

**Child Help USA**

15757 North 78th Street  
Scottsdale, AZ 85260  
(800) 4-A-CHILD  
[www.childhelpusa.org](http://www.childhelpusa.org)

**American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children**

350 Poplar Avenue  
Elmhurst, IL 60126  
(877) 402 7722  
[www.apsac.org](http://www.apsac.org)

**Tennyson Center for Children**

2950 Tennyson Street  
Denver, CO 80212  
(877) 224 8223  
[www.childabuse.org](http://www.childabuse.org)

**Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network**

2000 L St., NW  
Suite 406  
Washington, DC 20036  
(800) 656-HOPE  
[www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

**Sources**

APA - [Resolution on Psychological Issues Related to Child Abuse and Neglect](#)

APA - Protecting our Children from Abuse and Neglect - <http://www.apa.org/pi/cyf/abuse.html>

APA - Understanding Child Sexual Abuse - <http://www.apa.org/releases/sexabuse/homepage.html>

Child Welfare Information Gateway – Child Abuse and Neglect - <http://www.childwelfare.gov/can>

Medline Plus – Child Abuse - <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/childabuse.html>

**APA Resources**

APA: Act Against Violence Program - <http://actagainstviolence.apa.org>

APA Topics: Sexual Abuse - <http://www.apa.org/topics/topicsabuse.html>

APA Violence Prevention Office - <http://www.apa.org/pi/preventviolence/>

Children and Trauma - <http://www.apa.org/pi/cyf/child-trauma/>

Find a Psychologist - <http://locator.apa.org/>

Love Doesn't Have to Hurt Teens - <http://www.apa.org/pi/cyf/teen.pdf>

Protecting our Children from Abuse and Neglect - <http://www.apa.org/pi/cyf/abuse.html>

Report of the Working Group on Child Maltreatment Prevention in Community Health Centers -  
<http://www.apa.org/pi/preventviolence/working-group.html>

Understanding Child Sexual Abuse - <http://www.apa.org/releases/sexabuse/homepage.html>

**APA Books:**

From Child Sexual Abuse to Adult Sexual Risk - <http://books.apa.org/books.cfm?id=4317016>

Health Consequences of Abuse in the Family - <http://books.apa.org/books.cfm?id=4317023>

**APA Resolutions:**

[Bullying Among Children and Youth](#)

[Maltreatment of Children with Disabilities](#)

[Psychological Issues Related to Child Abuse and Neglect](#)

[Resolution Opposing Child Sexual Abuse](#)