

Child Advocacy Guide for Caregivers

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Maltreatment

Child maltreatment is the abuse and neglect that happens to children under 18 years of age. Children rarely tell about abuse to create problems. Often, they fear that telling will make people angry with them. It is extremely hard for children to talk about abuse. It is important to recognize the types of maltreatment and understand them. It is important that a child, who has experienced maltreatment, get the help they need.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is any physical force or action that may result in an injury of a child that is not an accident. The parent or caregiver may not have intended to hurt the child. Physical abuse is most often connected to physical punishment and can be confused with child discipline.

Physical abuse may involve a one-time event or repeated abuse, which may result in bruises, cuts, welts, burns, fractures, internal injuries, or even death. The injury may have resulted from severe discipline, including injury causing spanking or physical punishment that is not appropriate for the child's age or condition.

Neglect

Neglect happens when the parent, guardian, or other caregiver provide for a child's basic needs. This can be:

- Physical – do not provide needed food or shelter, or lack of appropriate supervision
- Medical – do not provide needed medical or mental health treatment
- Educational – do not provide for education or special education needs
- Emotional – do not meet a child's emotional or psychological needs. They let the child use alcohol or other drugs.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse happens when a child or adolescent is involved in sexual activities, which they cannot understand. Sexual abuse happens when a person makes a child have any form of sexual contact or forces the child to perform sexual acts. These acts are abuse even when offenders say they were gentle and did not hurt the child. Sexual abuse may involve:

- Touching private parts (with or without clothes)
- Penetration using an object
- Penetration using a body part
- Forced sexual acts between children
- Making the child look at, read, or participate in pornography
- All forms of oral genital, genital, or oral contact by or to the child

Sexual abuse is often overwhelming to children, especially when an adult is involved. Most children are taught to trust adults. They believe what adults tell them is true rather than rely on their own feelings.

Emotional Abuse (Psychological Abuse)

Emotional abuse is behavior that slows a child's emotional development. This can lower a child's sense of self-worth. The behaviors may include constant criticism, threats, or rejection. Emotional abuse can also happen when a caregiver does not show love, support, or guidance. Emotional abuse is often difficult to prove. Child protective services may not be able to intervene without evidence of harm or mental injury to the child. Emotional abuse is usually present when other types of maltreatment are identified.

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is part of the definition for child abuse or neglect. Situations that are considered abuse or neglect in some states may include:

- Exposing a child to the mother's use of an illegal drug or other substance before the child is born (prenatally)
- Manufacturing methamphetamine in the presence of a child
- Selling, distributing, or giving illegal drugs or alcohol to a child
- Using controlled substance by a caregiver that impairs the caregiver's ability to adequately care for the child

Signs and Symptoms

Signs that a child is being abused can be present. These can be similar to other signs of child stress, distress, or trauma. Signs of child abuse can be physical or emotional. Physical signs are less common for sexual abuse. Emotional signs can vary from good behavior to withdrawal, depression, or unexplained anger. It is important to remember that some children may show no signs at all.

Physical abuse involves external injuries and is easier to notice than other forms of abuse. Some signs of physical abuse may include:

- Injuries that cannot be explained
- Repeated injuries
- Cigarette burns
- Friction burns
- Fractures that cannot be explained
- Wearing clothes to hide the injury (Example: long-sleeve shirts)
- Changes in child's behavior may include:
 - Being hyperactive
 - Being disruptive
 - Showing aggressive behaviors
 - Becoming complacent
 - Compliance
 - Being shy
 - Becoming withdrawn
 - Decreased communication or not talking at all

Physical exam

The physical exam may show visible injury or show signs of internal injury. The physical exam may show signs of illness or disease related to abuse or not related to abuse. Depending on when the exam happens, injuries from abuse may be healing or have healed.

Most children, even those who reveal that abuse happened, will have normal physical exams. A normal exam does not prove that any prior penetration, sexual abuse, physical abuse, non-accidental trauma, and/or neglect has or has not happened. It is normal for the body to have no remaining physical signs or proof that abuse has happened. The child's disclosure (telling what happened) is the best indicator of what happened. Some children have no changes in behavior. Long-term effects can happen even if the child looks or feels fine.

What is Trauma?

Trauma can be any event that, when witnessed or experienced by a child or adolescent, is extremely upsetting to them. These events are often in situations where the child feared for their life or the lives of others. There are many different kinds of trauma including:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Exposure to violence
- Loss of a significant loved one
- House fire
- Car accident

Reactions to trauma

Each person can react in different ways to a traumatic event. These reactions depend on many things:

- Age when the trauma happened
- The severity of the trauma
- Presence or absence of a supportive caregiver
- Presence or absence of a stable and nurturing environment

Symptoms or side effects

Some possible symptoms or side effects may include:

- Trouble with sleeping
- Nightmares
- Not wanting to sleep alone
- Not able to stop thinking about the event
- Increased fear in both safe and risky situations
- Feelings of shame or guilt
- Difficulty concentrating
- Not able to stand or sit still
- Thoughts about death or dying
- Low self-esteem
- Mood swings
- Drop in grades or performance at school
- Irritable
- Problems with anger control

Physical exam

The physical exam may identify signs of trauma when a child has been physically or sexually abused. The exam may be normal, or show signs of other illnesses or diseases. A normal exam does not mean nothing happened.

The Grooming Process: Steps the Abuser Takes to Set up Children

Some caregivers wonder how it is possible for their children to be abused. Offenders use many tactics to gain access to children. These include:

1. **Seeking out an approachable child:** Abusers usually pick children who are easy to get to (relatives, friends, and neighbors). They may also seek children who have emotional needs for friendship and attention.
2. **Establishing a relationship with the child:** Abusers often seek ways to build trust and a friendship with children. They may spend time playing with them, volunteering for child duty, becoming their friend, or buying them candy or presents.
3. **Breaking down the child's resistance to touch:** Abusers may find ways to touch children often. The children are often confused when the touch becomes sexual. The abusers may play games with a lot of physical contact, like wrestling. They may also tickle children and sneak sexual touches.
4. **Finding ways to isolate a child:** Abusers find excuses to be alone with children so they can molest them. For example, they may babysit, invite them to sleep over, or take them camping.
5. **Blaming the child and keeping the secret:** Abusers try to make the children feel responsible so they will not tell. They use statements like:
 - If you tell, people will think you are bad.
 - If you tell our special secret, I will go to jail.
 - If you tell your mother, she will not love you anymore.
 - If you tell, you will be taken away from your family.

Disclosure

Most children who have been sexually abused do not tell (disclose) right away. Most children who have been sexually abused know their perpetrator.

Reasons Children Do Not Tell

You may have questions about why your child did not tell you right away or question why they did finally tell someone.

- They are afraid they will not be believed.
- They are afraid of getting into trouble themselves.
- They feel the abuse is their fault or that they caused the abuse to happen.
- They are scared by the threats made from the offender.
- They may love the offender and try to protect them.
- Children may not know how to tell. They may not know correct words or may describe the situation in vague terms.
- Children may fear the reactions from others.
- Some children do not know whom they should tell.
- Children may not feel there was a good time or opportunity to tell.
- Children may not know the sexual activity is wrong or that it is something anyone would want to know about.
- If it was sexual abuse involving a person of the same sex, they may fear being labeled a homosexual.
- Some children are embarrassed to talk about sexual issues and intimate details with people of authority.
- They may have been taught not to talk about their private parts or sexual behavior.

Why Do Children Finally Tell Someone?

- The abuse happens more often.
- The behavior of the offender scares the child.
- The child (for whatever reason) feels safe and able to tell.
- The child has a medical need or other physical problem that cause them to seek medical care.
- The child received some sexual abuse prevention information and realizes what has happened to them is wrong and should be reported.
- If the offender has told the child to keep the abuse a secret, sometimes the child may want to share the secret with a friend who then reports it.
- The child becomes a teenager and fears pregnancy.
- The child resents the offender's efforts to control their life.

After Disclosure

Life after disclosure can be very hard for a child. Disclosure introduces a child to many new groups of people outside of the family. Some examples are law enforcement, attorneys, counselors, child protection workers, and doctors. After disclosure, a child may have new experiences like meeting with adults, talking to strangers, and being denied from seeing a person they may love and miss.

Children who have experienced abuse often feel different from other children. They may feel “damaged” or “ruined” by the abuse and may think that others can see this damage. Adults may cause these feelings by treating the children differently after disclosure.

Caregiver's Responses

The report of child abuse does not only affect the child reporting the abuse. When abuse is reported, parents or caregivers of the child may feel many different emotions. This is normal. Report of abuse can affect your life in many ways, and it takes time to adjust. The following are some of the common thoughts and feelings of parents or caregivers. You can have more than one of these feelings at the same time.

Denial

Parents and caregivers often experience denial. You may find it hard to believe or accept that the abuse really happened. You may believe it happened, but that no real harm was done. For some people, it takes time to overcome denial and accept the realities of abuse.

Anger

You may feel angry at yourself for not protecting the child. You may feel angry at the offender (the person who commits an illegal, or evil act) for what he or she did. You may even feel angry at the child. Be honest about your feelings, and share them with a trusted person.

Helplessness

You may not know what to expect and how to feel. You may feel that things are out of your control. Some parents may fear that their children will be taken away. The Family Advocate can try and help answer any questions or worries you may have.

Lack of assertiveness

You may feel invisible and think there is nothing you can do to help the situation get better. We will help you learn what you can do to be an advocate for your child and yourself.

Shock, numbness, repulsion

You may have memories of being abused as a child. This can lead to shock, numbness, and fear for the new situation you find yourself in. You may need to seek counseling for yourself to recover from the abuse.

Guilt, self-blame

You may feel it is all your fault. The offender is responsible for the abuse, **not you**. The best thing you can do is support your child. Learn all you can to help make things better. Reading this handbook is a good first step.

Hurt and betrayal

It is normal to feel hurt from the loss of your child's innocence. You also may have lost a spouse or partner if that person was the offender. You may even have lost friends. It is very important to take time to grieve for these losses.

Concern about money

You may be worried about finances because of lost income. The Family Advocate can help you with community resources that may help you and your family.

Fear of violence

You may fear the offender will try to harm you or your children. If so, **call 911** or the community center for domestic violence.

Fear of drug or alcohol abuse

You may be afraid that you or the offender will abuse drugs or alcohol because of the stress. If you had an addiction to drugs or alcohol in the past, you may fear that you will return to the addiction. If you need help, call a treatment center in your community.

How Might My Child Be Affected by the Abuse?

All children react differently to the abuse. The responses depend on:

- Child's age
- Extent of abuse
- Support from others
- Child's relationship to the offender

Changes may occur in your child's behavior. You may not always be able to see these changes. Your child may not show outward signs now, but there may be a time later when behavior might change. At that time, it is important to get support. The **most** important factor affecting your child's recovery is the level of support they receive from you.

Your child may:

- Believe they have changed on the outside that people can see
- Display poor body image
- Express concern about growing up to be normal
- Believe they are not as good as before
- Describe themselves as ugly
- Express guilt after disclosure
- Feel they are at fault for the results of disclosure
- Have no behaviors or symptoms that you can identify

How Can I Help My Child?

The process of finding out what has happened or if anything has happened may seem overwhelming. It is important to always provide your child safety, love, and support. Make sure your child understands it is not his or her fault. Any hint or suspicion of abuse may cause strong and confusing emotions.

- Tell your child that you are proud of them for coming to the child advocacy center.
- Support your child's disclosure.
- Let your child know you are here to listen.
- Do not pressure your child to talk about their experience. Do not ask them for specific details.
- Listen and respond to your child in a way that makes them feel cared for and safe.
- Do not talk about the incident(s) in front of your child. Tell your child that you need privacy for talking with other appropriate adults.
- Let your child know it is okay to cry or be angry.
- Treat the child the same as before the disclosure.
- Any feelings or reaction is the right one for your child to have. Some children may experience feelings of relief, anger, or sadness. Other children will feel fine and want to carry on as usual.

Here are some supportive things you can say to your child:

- Thank you for telling me.
- I will help you.
- I know it is not your fault.
- I am sorry this happened to you.
- I will take care of you.
- Nothing about you made this happen.
- I am sad and angry that this happened to you, but I am not angry with you.
- I am angry at the person who did this.
- We will get through this together.

Some things you can do:

- Return to a normal routine as soon as possible.
- See that your child receives counseling as soon as possible. Hiding the problem causes more problems because it will not go away.
- Find help for yourself. You do not have to do it all on your own. Contact your child advocacy center for help.
- Seek out information and ask questions about how to help your child with the different feelings and behaviors they may have throughout the recovery process.
- Teach your child the rules of personal safety. Tell them what to do if someone tries to touch them in an uncomfortable way.
- Do not question your child about the abuse. If you do, you may jeopardize (mess up) the case in court against your child's offender. Specially trained professionals at the child advocacy center will interview your child to get the needed information without messing up the case or causing further

trauma to your child. If your child wants to talk about the abuse, listen to your child, but do not ask more questions.

- Keep your child away from the person suspected of the abuse. This is to protect you, the suspected offender, and the child.
- Do **not** talk about the case with other victims or their families.
- **Never** coach or advise your child on how to act or what to say to professionals or investigators. This could jeopardize the case.
- Do not have contact with the suspected offender.
- Stay close, and assure your child that you will keep him or her safe. Your child may need to feel more secure.
- Remember to give attention to your other children.
- Do not make a promise you cannot keep. It is ok to say I do not know, but I will find out.

Ask for Help

It is okay not to have all the answers. Let others help you. This will send a positive message to your child. Others want to show you support, but they may not know how. Asking for help can allow them to show their support. There will be times when your loved ones do not have the right answers. You may need to get professional guidance. Parenting is hard and facing these issues can be difficult. There is no shame in making sure your family has help in healing from abuse.

Comments You May Hear About the Abuse

Most people do not know much about abuse. Adults are the people most likely to say something to your child. Some comments you may hear include:

- What exactly happened to your child?
- Are you sure your child didn't make it up?
- Why did you not know it was happening?
- If it were my child, I'd just move away.
- Your poor child must be feeling really guilty.

What to Say to Others

One challenge your family will face will be what to say to others about the abuse. You do not need to give anyone an explanation. It may be easier to nod as an acknowledgment of what someone says. Some ways for you or your child to respond include:

- I would rather not talk about it.
- It has been a very difficult time for all of us.
- I appreciate your concern.
- I would prefer to respect my child's privacy.
- My mom or dad told me not to talk about it now.

Family and friends

You can decide who you will tell about the abuse. Talk to your child about which relatives or friends you plan to talk to about the abuse. Let your child have some choice about who is told. Your child may feel embarrassed or responsible. Let your child know the decision to not tell others is to help them, not because they did anything wrong.

Sometimes an extended family member is the first person to learn of the abuse. You may feel hurt that someone knew before you. Know that your child may have been trying to protect your feelings by telling someone else. Your child may have felt that person could tell you in a less upsetting way than he or she could.

If you are close to your family, you may want to talk with them about your child's abuse and how it has affected the family. Stressful situations can cause family members to have reactions of hysteria, horror, obvious distress, sincere concern, embarrassment, disgust, disinterest, or unnecessary questions for intimate details. Remember not to have these conversations when your child is present or close by.

If you know your family will react in a negative way, you may not want to share the information with them unless it becomes necessary. It is important to maintain your child's sense of privacy, self-control, and dignity. Be careful not to cause your child to feel shame.

Counseling Services

What is counseling?

Counseling is a time for a child to meet with a trained professional. The counselor and the child will work together to establish goals for treatment and a plan to achieve the goals.

How will it help my child?

The counseling relationship is a safe place for your child to label and express feelings and thoughts related to the abuse. The child can talk about feelings like anger, fear, and sadness. Your child will receive help to re-establish their personal boundaries. Your child will gain back their sense of self-worth, which was taken away by the abuser. Your child will learn that the abuse was not his or her fault.

How long will my child need counseling?

The length of time will vary. Your child's treatment plan and goals will be reviewed periodically. Your child may need to get counseling in the future when leaving home, getting married, or having a child.

How do I ask for counseling for my child?

You will receive information regarding counseling resources in your area. If you have any questions or need help finding a counselor, call your child advocacy center.

Taking Care of Yourself

You are going through a very difficult time, and you may feel pressure. Helping your child can be more difficult if you have a history of abuse. The child's disclosure may bring up unresolved issues of your own. Even though you are trying to take care of other people, you **need** to take care of yourself. Your health is very important. You need to find time to do something just for you and plan to do it regularly. This may be difficult to do, but it is in the best interest of you and your child. If you need to, schedule this time in advance. This will give you time to find reliable care for your children and keep your schedule clear.

Some suggested activities to take care of yourself include the following:

- Surround yourself with supportive, trustworthy, and caring adults
- Take some time for yourself by doing something you like to do:
 - Exercise
 - Go to the movies
 - Go out to dinner
 - Take a drive
 - Read a book
- **Seek counseling for yourself**

Common Terms and Abbreviations

AHT - Abusive Head Trauma

CAC - Child Advocacy Center

Colposcope - an instrument used to look for injury in the genital area (vagina and anus) or make sure that everything is healthy and normal

Colposcopy - a procedure to examine genitalia in a noninvasive manner using magnification and lighting

NP - Nurse Practitioner

PA - Physician Assistant

PDP - Present Danger Plan

SBS - Shaken Baby Syndrome - another word for AHT

STI - Sexually Transmitted Infection

