



Child Abuse Prevention



What is child abuse?

Child abuse is a non-accidental injury or pattern of injuries to a child for which there is no reasonable explanation. It is a very sensitive issue that needs to be carefully handled.

There are different types of child abuse. In *physical abuse*, children are slapped, hit, kicked or pushed, or have objects thrown at them, causing wounds, broken bones or other injuries. Severe physical abuse can cause major injury, permanent physical or emotional damage, or even death. *Sexual abuse* includes a wide range of sexual behavior, including fondling, masturbation, intercourse or involving children in pornography. *Emotional abuse* involves humiliation, dishonoring or other acts carried out over time that terrorize or frighten the child. *Neglect* means not feeding or caring for a child's basic needs or not adequately supervising a child.

Child abuse is usually a pattern of behavior, not a single act. Children are most often abused by parents, stepparents or other caregivers.

You can protect children from abuse

Reporting suspected child abuse is difficult, but the children you care for trust you to protect them from people who might hurt them. *Respond to your "gut" feeling and take actions that may save a child from harm!*

All child care providers are required by law (mandated) to make a report to their local Child Protective Services agency if they have a **reasonable suspicion** that a child in their care has been abused or neglected. This includes child care center directors, teachers and aides, family child care providers, and school-age child care providers. The center or agency you work for is not allowed to fire or discipline you for making a report, even if your supervisor disagrees with you.

What is reasonable suspicion?

Reasonable suspicion is the legal term used in California's child abuse reporting law. Reasonable suspicion means the suspicion is based on facts that would cause a reasonable person to suspect child abuse.

Remember, you don't have to be sure that abuse or neglect has occurred, but you must have a reasonable suspicion. You cannot be punished for reporting child abuse, but if you do not report, you can be punished. You can call your Child Protection Services agency anonymously to discuss your concerns or call the Healthline at 1-800-333-3212.

Behaviors suggesting abuse or neglect

The following behaviors could indicate abuse or neglect. *Remember that all children occasionally act in these ways.*

- Mood swings.
- Fear of certain people.
- Grouchiness or irritability.
- Is "too good," does not test boundaries.
- Uses manipulative behavior to get attention.
- Low self-esteem.
- Unexplained developmental delays.
- Inability to get along with other children.
- Is wary of adult contact, rejects affection.
- Has a vacant expression, cannot be drawn out.
- Seeks constant affection from anyone; is very clingy.
- Complains frequently of stomach aches or other pains; vomits.

What should you do if you suspect abuse?

You must report it.

1. It may help to talk to other staff members to see what they think. But even if they disagree with your opinion, *if you have a reasonable suspicion of abuse or neglect, you must report it.* It is your legal responsibility. Remember, you cannot get in legal trouble for making a report, only for not making one when you have reason to suspect abuse.

2. Make a report by phoning the local Child Protective Services agency (CPS) or, in an emergency, call the police. You will also need to fill out a form and send it to CPS within 36 hours. You have the right to get information from CPS about what happens to the family after the report is made.
3. Tell the CPS worker about your relationship with the family and ways you can support the family.
4. After making your report, be sure to call your Community Care Licensing evaluator and tell him or her of the situation. This protects you from possible complaints by the parents and lets the evaluator know you are acting responsibly.

Reporting suspected child abuse can be difficult

Thinking about child abuse can feel bad, and taking action can be difficult. Even though you care very much about the child and know your legal duty, you may still:

- Doubt your own judgment and feel disbelief that this family could commit child abuse.
- Fear that the parents may threaten or harm you or the child.
- Fear that you will lose your job or that the child will be withdrawn from your program.
- Feel nervous about dealing with authorities because of bad past experiences.
- Have strong emotions about child abuse because of your own family experiences.

All of these feelings are normal reactions to a stressful situation. While carrying out your responsibility to report suspected abuse, don't forget your own feelings. Find the emotional support you need.

Should you talk to the child's parents?

Whether you talk to the child's parents will depend on the situation, your relationship with the family, and where the abuse occurred. Think about whether talking to the parents might put the child in danger. If you are unsure, talk it over with the Healthline staff or the social worker at the Child Protective Services agency.

If you do talk to the parents, tell them that you made a report and what you said. Explain that you were required by law to do this. Tell them how the process works and what might happen next. Even though you may feel angry or scared, remember the parents need help and support to find a way out of the abuse cycle. Ask what you can do to help and offer information about local support services.

What should you say to the staff, the other families and the children?

When you make a report, talk to the people at the Child Protective Services agency to find out what will happen next. Remember that the family has a right to privacy. Information about them is confidential unless they give you permission to share it with specific people. You can tell those staff members who work with the child that a report has been made and what to expect.

Other parents may be aware of the problem. You can reassure them that their children are not in danger without telling them any confidential information. You can simply say that you have concerns about the child and are doing whatever you can to help. If the child has left your care, you can just say that he/she has gone on to another program; you don't need to say why.

You may also need to say something to the other children in your program. If the child leaves, you can simply tell the other children that he/she has left, and that you will miss him/her. If the child is receiving extra attention, you can explain to the others that you are helping make sure that he/she is okay, which takes extra time. You should add that you would do the same for them if they needed help.

What you can do to prevent child abuse

Child care settings are the only places where young children are seen day after day by people trained to observe their appearance, behavior and development. You may be the first person to suspect and report abuse and neglect. You also may be the biggest source of support and information available to the parents you serve. You can:

- Give families information on child development and appropriate discipline.
- Model good child care practices.
- Build a trusting relationship with families and discuss concerns.
- Help families establish positive relationships with their children.
- Refer families to community resources and support services.
- Inform parents that you are required to report suspected child abuse.
- Know the signs of parent burnout so you can offer support.
- Have a parent-staff workshop at your center with information about the issues.
- Educate young children about their right to say no.

Indicators of the three types of child abuse★

Physical Signs		
Neglect and Emotional Abuse	Physical Abuse	Sexual Abuse

The child:

- Is underweight or small for age
- Is always hungry
- Is not kept clean
- Is inappropriately dressed for weather
- Has not received needed medical care

The child:

- Has unexplained bruises or welts in unusual places
- Has several bruises or welts in different stages of healing, in unusual shapes, or in clusters
- Has unexplained burns
- Has unexplained broken bones or dislocations
- Has unexplained bites or explanation for injury differs from that of a parent or caretaker

The child:

- Has difficulty walking or sitting
- Is wearing torn, stained or bloody underwear
- Has pain, swelling or itching of genitals
- Has bruises, cuts or bleeding on genitals or anal area
- Feels pain when urinating or defecating
- Has a discharge from the vagina or penis, or a sexually transmitted disease

Behavioral Signs		
Neglect and Emotional Abuse	Physical Abuse	Sexual Abuse

The child:

- Begs for or steals food
- Frequently arrives at child care early and leaves later than expected
- Has frequent, unexplained absences
- Is overtired or listless

The child:

- Tells you he has been hurt by parents or others
- Becomes frightened when other children cry
- Says the parents or caretakers deserve to be punished
- Is afraid of certain people

The child:

- Acts withdrawn, over-involved in fantasy, or much younger than age
- Displays sophisticated or bizarre sexual knowledge or behavior
- Exhibits excessive or unusual touching of genitals
- Tells you that he/she has a secret he/she is not allowed to tell anyone
- Tries to hurt him/herself

**Many of these indicators also occur with children who have not been abused. Look for clusters of indicators, and do not reach the conclusion that a child has been abused too quickly. Remember, you must report your reasonable suspicion of abuse.*

*Produced by the California Childcare Health Program
and the California Consortium to Prevent Child Abuse through a grant from the Pacific Mutual Foundation*

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Local Resources on Child Abuse Reporting and Prevention

(fill in the phone numbers of your local resources and post)

Child Protective Services Agency: _____

Child Abuse Prevention Council: _____

Hot or Warm Line for Counseling: _____

1-800-333-3212

Child Care Healthline: _____

Domestic Violence/Rape Crisis: _____

Counseling/Mental Health Services: _____

Other Child Abuse Counseling/Parent Support Services: _____

Remember:

- Never hit or physically injure a child, physically restrain a child, belittle a child, or deprive a child of food, sleep or toileting.
- If you feel you may hurt a child—take a break, talk to a co-worker, call your local child abuse prevention program, council or warm line.
- If you are working with families from a different culture, you might consult with a local resource, i.e. Asian Resources, Indian Health Services, etc.
- It is always a good idea to keep very careful notes when you are concerned about a child. Record your observations, the circumstances, time and date. Date and sign all notes.
- Note any significant changes in the child's contacts with others.
- **And above all, remember—if you suspect abuse, you *must* report it.**

Be Prepared...

Before anything happens, complete this resource sheet and put it by your phone. Call your local Child Protective Services (CPS) agency to learn more about their procedures and ask them to send you report forms to keep in your file. Inform parents when they enroll their child that you are a mandated reporter.

rev. 3/01

