

Resource Article

Child Abuse

Janette Pepall

Child abuse occurs in all types of families, communities, and societies. Different countries may have different understandings of child abuse, but it always has a devastating impact on the victims. It affects their lives in the present and in the future. The risk of being abused is greater for younger children, females, orphans, children in group homes or foster care, and children with disabilities.

Impact of Child Abuse

A child who has been abused may suffer from the following:

- Physical injury
- Intense feelings of fear, guilt, or worthlessness
- Delayed development or disability
- Difficulty trusting adults
- Antisocial behaviours, such as aggression and poor school attendance
- Compliant behaviours, increasing the risk of further exploitation
- Depression
- Substance and alcohol abuse
- Poor relationships
- Suicidal thoughts
- Eating disorders

Categories of Abuse

A child may be abused physically, sexually, or emotionally. A neglected child is also being abused. Almost all at-risk children suffer from 1 or more types of abuse.

Physical abuse—You cannot always tell if a child has been abused. Signs of abuse may be as simple as marks on the skin. Look for injuries with no reasonable explanation. For example, the child has a broken arm or bruises on his face and his explanation for the injury does not make sense.

Sexual abuse—Sexual abuse is when a child participates in sexual activities that she does not fully understand. Sometimes she is forced to participate. Even if she agrees, she does not understand what she is agreeing to. Sexual abuse includes fondling a child as well as engaging in sexual acts. Involving a child in prostitution, using a child to make pornography, and allowing a child to watch sexual acts are also sexual abuse.

Neglect abuse—Neglect is when an adult fails to provide a child with his basic needs. These basic needs include food, shelter, medical care, safety, education, appropriate touch, and attention. A young person needs all of these in order to grow into a healthy adult.

Emotional abuse—Emotional abuse is difficult to detect, identify, and stop. It is often accompanied by other abuses. Emotional abuse happens when a child is threatened, isolated, or does not receive appropriate affection.

Indicators of Abuse

A child may show all, some, or none of the symptoms below. Also, there are other factors what can cause a child to display these behaviours. It is best to have a child checked by a professional if you suspect he or she has been abused.

Sharing—The victim or the abuser shares information about the abuse

Physical indicators—Bruises, periods of unconsciousness, welts, fractures, abdominal injuries, internal injuries, bite marks, and head injuries

Behavioural signs—Fear of adults, aggression, bedwetting, stealing or scavenging food, unexplained headaches, stomachaches, sudden change of moods, difficulty sleeping, and low self-esteem

Learning problems—Not doing well at school, including poor concentration

Developmental delay—A delay in 1 or more developmental areas

Self-comforting behaviours—Thumb-sucking, rocking, masturbation, and head-banging

Sexual indicators—Injuries to genitals, breasts, or buttocks; itching, soreness, discharge, bleeding, or pain in the same areas; frequent urination; the presence of a sexually transmitted disease

Developmentally—Inappropriate sexual behaviour—Over-attentiveness to the opposite sex, displaying genitals, and inappropriate knowledge of sexual facts

Neglect—Cold hands and feet, blotchy skin, listless appearance, poor hygiene habits, and chronic tiredness

What Can You Do about Abuse?

Knowing the symptoms will help you to be more aware. If you are working with children as a volunteer or a professional, find out about your church or organization's child protection policy. If your group does not have one, encourage the leadership to develop a policy. Be sure that everyone who interacts with children has read it and complies with it.

Provide opportunities for creativity to encourage children to express their feelings. If a child draws a picture that is dark, angry, or suggestive, ask him to explain it to you. If you see a child touching others inappropriately during a classroom activity, invite him to speak with you after class. Report any abuse to the appropriate authorities if possible.

For children, a consistent routine creates feelings of safety and security. Also, maintaining an environment of respect for others encourages sharing.

Children are our most vulnerable citizens and have a right to be protected from abuse and exploitation. It is the responsibility of every parent, ministry, organization, and government to create safe places for them.