

Childhood Abuse Recognition and Prevention

Child abuse and neglect are serious health problems that can have long-term impact on health, opportunity, and well-being. This issue includes all types of abuse and neglect against a child under the age of 18 by a parent, caregiver, or another person in a custodial role (such as a religious leader, a coach, a teacher) that results in harm, the potential for harm, or threat of harm to a child. At least 1 in 7 children have experienced child abuse and/or neglect in the past year, and this is likely an underestimate. In 2019, 1,840 children died of abuse and neglect in the United States. The total lifetime economic burden associated with child abuse and neglect is over \$400 billion a year; this rivals the cost of other high-profile public health problems, such as stroke and Type II diabetes. It occurs in all cultures, countries and economic classes.



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There are four common types of abuse and neglect:

- **Physical abuse** is the intentional use of physical force that can result in physical injury. Examples include hitting, kicking, shaking, burning, or other shows of force against a child. It can also involve withholding sleep, food, or medication, or even fabricating a symptom or deliberately inducing illness in a child.
- **Sexual abuse** involves pressuring or forcing a child to engage in sexual acts. It includes behaviors such as fondling, penetration, and exposing a child to other sexual activities. It is considered sexual abuse even if the child does not understand what is happening, even if there is no force, violence or even contact.
- **Emotional abuse** refers to behaviors that harm a child's self-worth or emotional well-being; when it is conveyed to the child that they are inadequate, unloved, or only valued as far as the perpetrator's needs are concerned. Examples include name-calling, shaming, rejection, withholding love, ridiculing what they say, limiting physical contact, preventing normal social interaction with peers, bullying and threatening.
- **Neglect** is the failure to meet a child's basic physical and emotional needs, resulting in impairment of the child's health or development. These needs include housing, food, clothing, education, and access to medical care. Other examples include locking a child in a room or closet, leaving the child alone for a long period or time or leaving the child in a situation in which they might experience emotional or physical danger.

Children who are abused and neglected may suffer immediate physical injuries such as cuts, bruises, or broken bones, as well as emotional and psychological problems, such as impaired social-emotional skills or anxiety. Child abuse and neglect can also have a tremendous impact if left untreated. For example, exposure to violence in childhood increases the risks of injury, future violence victimization and perpetration, substance abuse, sexually transmitted infections, delayed brain development, lower educational attainment, and limited employment opportunities. Chronic abuse may result in toxic stress, which can change brain development and increase the risk for problems like post-traumatic stress disorder and learning, attention, and memory difficulties.

Abuse can be hard to recognize. Some of the signs, such as bruising, can be part of normal growing up. A child is also very unlikely to ask for help or report abuse, because they are afraid of the person who is abusing them, fear that they will not be believed, feel ashamed or embarrassed or worry that they are to blame. Recognizing a pattern over time may be the only way to spot a problem.

- **Signs of physical abuse** – Unexplained black eyes, broken bones, bruises, bites, or burns; injuries that may reveal a pattern, for example, more than one burn or welts on the hand; protesting or crying when it is time to go to a particular location, whether home or school, or another place where abuse might occur; appearing to be frightened of a specific individual; flinching when touched; wearing inappropriate clothing, for example, long sleeves in summer, to cover up injuries.
- **Signs of sexual abuse** - Displaying sexual knowledge or behavior which is beyond their years, bizarre, or unusual; withdrawing from friends and others; running away from home; shying away from a specific person; wetting the bed after not doing so before; changes in mood or appetite; pregnancy or having a sexually transmitted disease (STD), especially before the age of 14 years.
- **Signs of emotional abuse** – Appearing withdrawn, anxious, or afraid; showing extremes in behavior (passivity, aggressiveness, even strict compliance); lack of attachment to parent/caregiver, age-inappropriate behavior (e.g., thumb sucking).
- **Signs of an abuser** – Appear overly severe and harsh when with the child; unpredictable behavior; use fear of physical punishment as a way to control a child's behavior; has history of abuse as a child; untreated mental illness; substance or alcohol abuse; lack of support; stress; poor parenting skills.

Ten Ways to Prevent Child Abuse

According to Prevent Child Abuse America, here are 10 things you can do to prevent child abuse:⁸

1. Be a nurturing parent.
2. Help a friend, relative or neighbor.
3. Help yourself.
4. Know what to do if your baby cries.
5. Get involved in developing the services needed to meet the needs of children and families.
6. Look into parenting resources at your local library and help develop resources, if needed.
7. Promote child abuse prevention programs at school.
8. Monitor your child's television and video viewing as violent images can harm young children.
9. Volunteer at a local child abuse prevention program.
10. Report suspected child abuse or neglect to proper authorities.

Other tips for reducing the risk

- Talking to your child about appropriate and inappropriate behaviors and safe and unsafe situations.
- Role playing what to do if ever someone behaves inappropriately, and how to get help.
- Encouraging open communication with your child, as this will make it easier to spot if anything unusual happens.
- Ensure that your own house and yard are safe and plan ahead to make sure you never have to leave young children alone.
- Always knowing where your child is when they are out.
- Building relationships with the people who look after your children, including teachers, babysitters and parents of friends.

Should a situation arise in which your child needs to be admitted to a hospital, remember Hendricks Regional Health is home to Hendricks County's only designated pediatric unit, specially designed to treat children. Our experienced staff is available 24/7 to care for all ages from birth to 18 years.