

Section I - Information for Parents

Child Abuse: Basic Information for Parents

An abused or neglected child is a child who is harmed, or threatened with physical or mental harm, by the acts or lack of action of a person responsible for the child's care. There are several forms of abuse: physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse. Child neglect is a form of abuse that occurs when a person responsible for the care of a child is able, but fails, to provide necessary food, clothing, shelter, or care. Each state has its own definitions and laws concerning child abuse and child neglect.

Child abuse and neglect are serious problems for our society. The number of cases reported has increased each year since 1976, when statistics were first kept. Brief discussions of each form of abuse are presented below.

Neglect

A child is neglected if the persons this child depends on do not provide food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education, and supervision. When these basic needs are *deliberately withheld*, not because the parents or caregivers are poor, it is considered neglect. Often parents or caregivers of neglected children are so overwhelmed by their own needs that they cannot recognize the needs of their children.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is the deliberate injury of a child by a person responsible for the child's care. Physical abuse often stems from unreasonable punishment, or by punishment that is too harsh for the child. Sometimes it is the result of a caregiver's reaction to stress. Drinking and drug abuse by caretakers have become more common contributing factors in physical abuse cases.

Physical abuse injuries can include bruises, broken bones, burns, and abrasions. Children experience minor injuries as a normal part of childhood, usually in predictable places such as the shins, knees, and elbows. When the injuries are in soft-tissue areas on the abdomen or back, or don't seem to be typical childhood injuries, physical abuse becomes a possibility.

Physical abuse happens to children of all age groups; however, youth ages 12 to 17 have the highest rate of injury from physical abuse. This is possibly due to increasing conflict between parents and children as children become more independent.

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is harder to recognize, but is just as harmful to the child as other forms of abuse. Emotional abuse damages the child's self-esteem and, in extreme cases, can lead to developmental problems and speech disorders. A child suffers from emotional abuse when constantly ridiculed, rejected, blamed, or compared unfavorably with brothers or sisters or other children.

Expecting too much from the child in academics, athletics, or other areas is a common cause of emotional abuse by parents or other adults. When a child can't meet these expectations, the child feels that he or she is never quite good enough.

Sexual Abuse

When an adult or an older child uses his or her authority over a child to involve the child in sexual activity, it is sexual abuse, and that person is a child molester. The molester might use tricks, bribes, threats, or force to persuade the child to join in sexual activity. Sexual abuse includes any activity performed for the sexual satisfaction of the molester, including acts ranging from exposing his or her sex organs (exhibitionism), observing another's sex organs or sexual activity (voyeurism), to fondling and rape.

Here are a few facts you should know about child sexual abuse:

- Child sexual abuse occurs to as many as 25 percent of girls and 14 percent of boys before they reach 18 years of age.
- Boys and girls could be sexually abused at any age; however, most sexual abuse occurs between the ages of 7 and 13.
- Children are most likely to be molested by someone they know and trust.
- Eighty to 90 percent of sexually abused boys are molested by acquaintances who are nonfamily members.
- Females perform 20 percent of the sexual abuse of boys under age 14 (prepubescents).
- Few sexually abused children tell anyone that they have been abused. Children are usually told to keep the abuse secret. This could involve threats, bribes, or physical force.
- Children might feel responsible for the abuse and fear an angry reaction from their parents.

Preteen and teenage boys are especially at risk for sexual abuse. The physical and hormonal changes caused by puberty, and their natural curiosity about their new emotions and feelings, make these youth likely targets for child molesters. The normal desire of boys this age to show their independence from their parents' control adds to the risk. This combination might keep boys this age from asking their parents for help when faced with sexual abuse.

Sexual Molestation by Peers

Approximately one-third of sexual molestation occurs at the hands of other children. If your child tells you about club initiations in which sexual activity is included, or if your child tells you about inappropriate or tricked, pressured, or forced sexual activity by other children, this is a form of sexual abuse and you need to take steps to stop the activity. This kind of sexual misconduct is serious and should not be ignored.

Children who molest other children need professional help. They are much more likely to respond to treatment when young than are adults who were molesters as children and received no treatment, and continue to molest children as adults.

Parents and other adults who work with children need to distinguish between sexual behavior that is a normal part of growing up, and sexual behavior that is abusive. If you find your child has engaged in sexual behavior that might not be abusive, but which bothers you, use the opportunity to discuss the behavior and help your child understand why it bothers you.

Signs of Sexual Abuse

The best sign that a child has been sexually abused is his statement that he was. Children often do not report their abuse, so parents should be alert for other signs. These are some signs to watch for:

- **Hints, indirect messages**—Refusing to go to a friend's or relative's home for no apparent reason; for example, "I just don't like him anymore."
- **Seductive or provocative behavior**—Acting out adult sexual behavior or using sexual language a child his age is unlikely to know.
- **Physical symptoms**—Irritation of genital or anal areas.

The following are common signs that children are upset. If present for more than a few days, these signs could indicate that something is wrong and your child needs help and parental support. They might also be signs that your child is being sexually abused:

- **Self-destructive behavior**—Using alcohol or drugs, deliberately harming himself, running away, attempting suicide, or sexual recklessness or promiscuity.
- **Unhappiness**—Undue anxiety and crying, sleep disturbances, or loss of appetite.
- **Regression**—Behaving like a younger child, thumb sucking, or bed-wetting.
- **Difficulty at school**—Sudden drop in grades, behavioral problems, or truancy.

Preventing Child Abuse

Except for sexual abuse of boys, the great majority of child abuse occurs within families. Prevention efforts for emotional and physical abuse as well as neglect generally focus on helping abusers, often the parents, change their behavior.

Some physical and emotional abuses are reactions by parents to the stresses in their lives. By learning to recognize these stresses, and then taking a time-out when the pressures mount, we can avoid abusing those we love. The next section lists some alternatives to physical and emotional abuse for overstressed parents. These suggestions come from the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse.

In addition to the alternatives on the next page, parents and other child caregivers may want to think about the following questions* suggested by Douglas Besharov, the first director of the U.S. National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, regarding the methods of discipline they use.

- Is the purpose of the punishment to educate the child or to vent the parent's anger?
- Is the child capable of understanding the relationship between his behavior and the punishment?
- Is the punishment appropriate and within the bounds of acceptable discipline?
- Is a less severe, but equally effective, punishment available?
- Is the punishment degrading, brutal, or extended beyond the limits of what the child can handle?
- If physical force is used, is it done carefully to avoid injury?

These questions help to define the boundaries between acceptable discipline and child abuse. Other causes of child abuse inside the family might be much more complex and require professional help to resolve.

Alternatives to Child Abuse

The next time everyday pressures build up to the point where you feel like lashing out—;**Stop!** Try any of these simple alternatives. You'll feel better ... and so will your child:

- Take a deep breath. And another. Then remember you are the adult.
- Close your eyes and imagine you're hearing what your child is about to hear.
- Press your lips together and count to ten; or, better yet, to twenty.
- Put your child in a time-out chair. (Remember this rule: One time-out minute for each year of age.)
- Put yourself in a time-out chair. Think about why you are angry: Is it your child, or is your child simply a convenient target for your anger?
- Phone a friend.
- If someone can watch the children, go outside and take a walk.

- Splash cold water on your face.
- Hug a pillow.
- Turn on some music. Maybe even sing along.
- Pick up a pencil and write down as many *helpful* words as you can think of. Save the list.

Few parents mean to abuse their children. When parents take time out to get control of themselves before they grab hold of their children, everybody wins.

Talking with Your Child About Sexual Abuse

Some parents would almost rather have a tooth pulled than talk with their children about sexual abuse. This reluctance seems to increase with the age of the child. To help you in this regard, the information in Section II focuses on sexual abuse prevention.

The following information should help you and your child talk about sexual abuse prevention:

- *If you feel uncomfortable discussing sexual abuse with your child, let him know.* When you feel uncomfortable discussing sexual abuse with your children and try to hide your uneasiness, your children might misinterpret the anxiety and be less likely to approach you when they need help. You can use a simple statement like, "I wish we did not have to talk about this. I am uncomfortable because I don't like to think that this could happen to you. I want you to know that it's important and you can come to me whenever you have a question or if anybody ever tries to hurt you."
- *Children at this age are developing an awareness of their own sexuality and need parental help to sort out what is and is not exploitive.* Children at this age need specific permission to ask questions about relationships and feelings. Nonspecific "good touch, bad touch" warnings are insufficient, since most of the touching they experience might be "confusing touch." Adolescents also need parental help to set boundaries for their relationships with others—an awareness of when they are being controlling or abusive.
- *Many children at this age feel it is more important to be "cool" than it is to ask questions or seek parental assistance.* Your son might resist discussing the material in this booklet with you. He might be giggly, unfocused, or restless. He might tell you that he already knows about sexual abuse. That's all right. The point of discussing sexual abuse with him is to let him know that if and when he has questions or problems he can't handle by himself, you will help him. If he tells you he already knows about sexual abuse, you can ask him to tell you what he knows.

Today's teenagers and preteens receive a lot of misinformation about sexuality, relationships, and sexual abuse. Their role models are likely to be rock stars and

other media personalities. As influential as these are, surveys of young people indicate that parents continue to be a strong influence in their lives.

When a Child Tells You About Abuse

If your child becomes a victim of abuse, your first reaction can be very important in helping him through the ordeal. The following guidelines may help you:

- **Don't** panic or overreact to the information your child tells you.
- **Don't** criticize your child or tell your child he misunderstood what happened.
- **Do** respect your child's privacy and take your child to a place where the two of you can talk without interruptions or distractions.
- **Do** reassure your child that he is not to blame for what happened. Tell him that you appreciate being told about the incident and will help to make sure that it won't happen again.
- **Do** encourage your child to tell the proper authorities what happened, but try to avoid repeated interviews that can be stressful to the child.
- **Do** consult your family doctor or other child abuse authority about the need for medical care or counseling for your child.

You should show real concern, but NOT alarm or anger, when questioning your child about possible sexual abuse.

Finally, if your child has been sexually abused, do not blame yourself or your child. People who victimize children are not easy to identify. They come from all walks of life and all socioeconomic levels. Often they have a position of status—they go to church, hold regular jobs, and are active in the community. Child molesters are sometimes very skilled at controlling children, often by giving excessive attention, gifts, and money.

Child molesters use their skills on parents and other adults, disguising their abusive behavior behind friendship and care for the child.

Resources

BSA Youth Protection Materials

A Time to Tell is a videotape produced by the BSA to educate boys 11 to 14 years of age about sexual abuse. This video introduces the "three Rs" of Youth Protection. Boy Scout troops are encouraged to view the video once each year. It is available from your BSA local council. A meeting guide supporting its use can be found in the *Scoutmaster Handbook* (beginning with the 1995 edition).

For Scouting's leaders and parents, the BSA has a videotaped training program, *Youth Protection Guidelines: Training for Volunteer Leaders and Parents*. This

also is available from your BSA local council, and regular training sessions are scheduled in most districts. It addresses many questions that Scout volunteers and parents ask regarding child sexual abuse.

In addition to these videotaped materials, the BSA sometimes provides Youth Protection information to its members and families through *Boys' Life* and *Scouting* magazines.

Other Sources of Child Abuse Prevention Information

National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
P.O. Box 1182
Washington, DC 20013
800-394-3366

National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse
332 South Michigan Avenue, Suite 1600
Chicago, IL 60604-4537
312-663-3520

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
2101 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 550
Arlington, VA 22201
800-843-5678

* Adapted from Douglas J. Besharov *Recognizing Child Abuse: A Guide for the Concerned*. New York: Free Press, 1990.