

*Provided by Child Welfare Information Gateway, a service of the Children's Bureau,
Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*

The following can be signs of abuse (emotional, sexual, physical) and/or neglect. It is important to note, however, that these types of abuse are more typically found in combination than alone. A physically abused child, for example, is often emotionally abused as well, and a sexually abused child also may be neglected.

General Signs

The Child

- ❖ Shows sudden changes in behavior or school performance
- ❖ Has not received help for physical or medical problems brought to the parents' attention
- ❖ Has learning problems (or difficulty concentrating) that cannot be attributed to specific physical or psychological causes
- ❖ Is always watchful, as though preparing for something bad to happen
- ❖ Lacks adult supervision
- ❖ Is overly compliant, passive, or withdrawn
- ❖ Comes to school or other activities early, stays late, and does not want to go home

The Parent

- ❖ Shows little concern for the child
- ❖ Denies the existence of—or blames the child for—the child's problems in school or at home
- ❖ Asks teachers or other caregivers to use harsh physical discipline if the child misbehaves
- ❖ Sees the child as entirely bad, worthless, or burdensome
- ❖ Demands a level of physical or academic performance the child cannot achieve

Recognizing Signs of Abuse

- ❖ Looks primarily to the child for care, attention, and satisfaction of emotional needs

The Parent and Child

- ❖ Rarely touch or look at each other
- ❖ Consider their relationship entirely negative
- ❖ State that they do not like each other

Signs of Physical Abuse

The Child

- ❖ Has unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, or black eyes
- ❖ Has fading bruises or other marks noticeable after an absence from school
- ❖ Seems frightened of the parents and protests or cries when it is time to go home
- ❖ Shrinks at the approach of adults
- ❖ Reports injury by a parent or another adult caregiver

The Parent or Other Adult Caregiver

- ❖ Offers conflicting, unconvincing, or no explanation for the child's injury
- ❖ Describes the child as "evil" or in some other very negative way
- ❖ Uses harsh physical discipline with the child
- ❖ Has a history of abuse as a child

Signs of Neglect

The Child

- ❖ Is frequently absent from school
- ❖ Begs or steals food or money
- ❖ Lacks needed medical or dental care, immunizations, or glasses
- ❖ Is consistently dirty and has strong body odor

Recognizing Signs of Abuse

- ❖ Lacks sufficient clothing for the weather
- ❖ Abuses alcohol or other drugs
- ❖ States that there is no one at home to provide care

The Parent or Other Adult Caregiver

- ❖ Appears to be indifferent to the child
- ❖ Seems apathetic or depressed
- ❖ Behaves irrationally or in a bizarre manner
- ❖ Is abusing alcohol or other drugs

Signs of Sexual Abuse

The Child

- ❖ Has difficulty walking or sitting
- ❖ Suddenly refuses to change for gym or to participate in physical activities
- ❖ Reports nightmares or bedwetting
- ❖ Experiences a sudden change in appetite
- ❖ Demonstrates bizarre, sophisticated, or unusual sexual knowledge or behavior
- ❖ Becomes pregnant or contracts a venereal disease, particularly if under age 14
- ❖ Runs away
- ❖ Reports sexual abuse by a parent or another adult caregiver

The Parent or Other Adult Caregiver

- ❖ Is unduly protective of the child or severely limits the child's contact with other children, especially of the opposite sex
- ❖ Is secretive and isolated
- ❖ Is jealous or controlling with family members

Recognizing Signs of Abuse

Signs of Emotional Abuse

The Child

- ❖ Shows extremes in behavior, such as overly compliant or demanding behavior, extreme passivity, or aggression
- ❖ Is either inappropriately adult (parenting other children, for example) or inappropriately infantile (frequently rocking or head-banging, for example)
- ❖ Is delayed in physical or emotional development
- ❖ Has attempted suicide
- ❖ Reports a lack of attachment to the parent

The Parent or Other Adult Caregiver

- ❖ Constantly blames, belittles, or berates the child
- ❖ Is unconcerned about the child and refuses to consider offers of help for the child's problems
- ❖ Overtly rejects the child

References

Resources on the Child Welfare Information Gateway Website: Child Abuse and Neglect, posted on the web site www.childwelfare.gov/can/

Defining Child Abuse and Neglect, on the web site www.childwelfare.gov/can/defining/

Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect, on the web site www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/

Recognizing Child Abuse: What Parents Should Know. Prevent Child Abuse America, 2003