



April is Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Awareness Month

Child Abuse & Neglect

Risk factors for child abuse and neglect

While child abuse and neglect occurs in all types of families—even in those that look happy from the outside—children are at a much greater risk in certain situations.

- **Domestic violence.** Witnessing domestic violence is terrifying to children and emotionally abusive. Even if the mother does her best to protect her children and keeps them from being physically abused, the situation is still extremely damaging. If you or a loved one is in an abusive relationship, getting out is the best thing for protecting the children.
- **Alcohol and drug abuse.** Living with an alcoholic or addict is very difficult for children and can easily lead to abuse and neglect. Parents who are drunk or high are unable to care for their children, make good parenting decisions, and control often-dangerous impulses. Substance abuse also commonly leads to physical abuse.
- **Untreated mental illness.** Parents who suffering from depression, an anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, or another mental illness have trouble taking care of themselves, much less their children. A mentally ill or traumatized parent may be distant and withdrawn from his or her children, or quick to anger without understanding why. Treatment for the caregiver means better care for the children.
- **Lack of parenting skills.** Some caregivers never learned the skills necessary for good parenting. Teen parents, for example, might have unrealistic expectations about how much care babies and small children need. Or parents who were themselves victims of child abuse may only know how to raise their children the way they were raised. In such cases, parenting classes, therapy, and caregiver support groups are great resources for learning better parenting skills.
- **Stress and lack of support.** Parenting can be a very time-intensive, difficult job, especially if you're raising children without support from family, friends, or the community or you're dealing with relationship problems or financial difficulties. Caring for a child with a disability, special needs, or difficult behaviors is also a challenge. It's important to get the support you need, so you are emotionally and physically able to support your child.

Recognizing abusive behavior in yourself

If you need professional help...Do you see yourself in some of these descriptions, painful as it may be? Do you feel angry and frustrated and don't know where to turn? Raising children is one of life's greatest challenges and can trigger anger and frustration in the most even tempered. If you grew up in a household where screaming and shouting or violence was the norm, you may not know any other way to raise your kids.

Recognizing that you have a problem is the biggest step to getting help. If you yourself were raised in an abusive situation, that can be extremely difficult. Children experience their world as normal. It may have been normal in your family to be slapped or pushed for little to no reason, or that mother was too drunk to cook dinner. It may have been normal for your parents to call you stupid, clumsy, or worthless. Or it may have been normal to watch your mother get beaten up by your father.

It is only as adults that we have the perspective to step back and take a hard look at what is normal and what is abusive. Read the above sections on the types of abuse and warning signs. Do any of those ring a bell for you now? Or from when you were a child? The following is a list of warning signs that you may be crossing the line into abuse:

How do you know when you've crossed the line?

- **You can't stop the anger.** What starts as a swat on the backside may turn into multiple hits getting harder and harder. You may shake your child harder and harder and finally throw him or her down. You find yourself screaming louder and louder and can't stop yourself.
- **You feel emotionally disconnected from your child.** You may feel so overwhelmed that you don't want anything to do with your child. Day after day, you just want to be left alone and for your child to be quiet.
- **Meeting the daily needs of your child seems impossible.** While everyone struggles with balancing dressing, feeding, and getting kids to school or other activities, if you continually can't manage to do it, it's a sign that something might be wrong.
- **Other people have expressed concern.** It may be easy to bristle at other people expressing concern. However, consider carefully what they have to say. Are the words coming from someone you normally respect and trust? Denial is not an uncommon reaction.

Breaking the cycle of child abuse

If you have a history of child abuse, having your own children can trigger strong memories and feelings that you may have repressed. This may happen when a child is

born, or at later ages when you remember specific abuse to you. You may be shocked and overwhelmed by your anger, and feel like you can't control it. But you can learn new ways to manage your emotions and break your old patterns.

Remember, you are the most important person in your child's world. It's worth the effort to make a change, and you don't have to go it alone. Help and support are available.

Tips for changing your reactions

- **Learn what is age appropriate and what is not.** Having realistic expectations of what children can handle at certain ages will help you avoid frustration and anger at normal child behavior. For example, newborns are not going to sleep through the night without a peep, and toddlers are not going to be able to sit quietly for extended periods of time.
- **Develop new parenting skills.** While learning to control your emotions is critical, you also need a game plan of what you are going to do instead. Start by learning appropriate discipline techniques and how to set clear boundaries for your children. Parenting classes, books, and seminars are a way to get this information. You can also turn to other parents for tips and advice.
- **Take care of yourself.** If you are not getting enough rest and support or you're feeling overwhelmed, you are much more likely to succumb to anger. Sleep deprivation, common in parents of young children, adds to moodiness and irritability—exactly what you are trying to avoid.
- **Get professional help.** Breaking the cycle of abuse can be very difficult if the patterns are strongly entrenched. If you can't seem to stop yourself no matter how hard you try, it's time to get help, be it therapy, parenting classes, or other interventions. Your children will thank you for it.
- **Learn how you can get your emotions under control.** The first step to getting your emotions under control is realizing that they are there. If you were abused as a child, you may have an especially difficult time getting in touch with your range of emotions. You may have had to deny or repress them as a child, and now they spill out without your control.

Helping an abused or neglected child

What should you do if you suspect that a child has been abused? How do you approach him or her? Or what if a child comes to you? It's normal to feel a little overwhelmed and confused in this situation. Child abuse is a difficult subject that can be hard to accept and even harder to talk about.

Just remember, you can make a tremendous difference in the life of an abused child, especially if you take steps to stop the abuse early. When talking with an abused child, the best thing you can provide is calm reassurance and unconditional support. Let your actions speak for you if you're having trouble finding the words. Remember that talking

about the abuse may be very difficult for the child. It's your job to reassure the child and provide whatever help you can.

Tips for talking to an abused child

- **Avoid denial and remain calm.** A common reaction to news as unpleasant and shocking as child abuse is denial. However, if you display denial to a child, or show shock or disgust at what they are saying, the child may be afraid to continue and will shut down. As hard as it may be, remain as calm and reassuring as you can.
- **Don't interrogate.** Let the child explain to you in his or her own words what happened, but don't interrogate the child or ask leading questions. This may confuse and fluster the child and make it harder for them to continue their story.
- **Reassure the child that they did nothing wrong.** It takes a lot for a child to come forward about abuse. Reassure him or her that you take what is said seriously, and that it is not the child's fault.
- **Safety comes first.** If you feel that your safety or the safety of the child would be threatened if you try to intervene, leave it to the professionals. You may be able to provide more support later after the initial professional intervention.

Reporting child abuse and neglect

If you suspect a child is being abused, it's critical to get them the help he or she needs. Reporting child abuse seems so official. Many people are reluctant to get involved in other families' lives.

Understanding some of the myths behind reporting may help put your mind at ease if you need to report child abuse.

- **I don't want to interfere in someone else's family.** The effects of child abuse are lifelong, affecting future relationships, self-esteem, and sadly putting even more children at risk of abuse as the cycle continues. Help break the cycle of child abuse.
- **What if I break up someone's home?** The priority in child protective services is keeping children in the home. A child abuse report does not mean a child is automatically removed from the home - unless the child is clearly in danger. Support such as parenting classes, anger management or other resources may be offered first to parents if safe for the child.
- **They will know it was me who called.** Reporting is anonymous. In most places, you do not have to give your name when you report child abuse. The child abuser cannot find out who made the report of child abuse.
- **It won't make a difference what I have to say.** If you have a gut feeling that something is wrong, it is better to be safe than sorry. Even if you don't see the

whole picture, others may have noticed as well, and a pattern can help identify child abuse that might have otherwise slipped through the cracks.

Are you or a child you know being abused? Please call your local Police Department or Department of Social Services.

Wish List:

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Laundry Soap

Fabric Softner

Toilet Paper

Paper Towels

Garbage Bags

Make Up, Face Wash, Razors, Toe/Finger Nail Clippers

Hair Products (Mouse, Hairspray, Pony Tail Holders, Headbands)

Curling Irons/Blow Dryers

Towels

Dishes, Pots/Pans, Silverware