

How do we define Child Abuse?

Child Abuse whether it is verbal, physical, sexual, or neglect is an event that leaves children and teenagers suffering and it also affects them in every aspect of their life. Abuse causes the individual to have difficulty concentrating, difficulties with poor school performance, they shy away from being with their friends, and often children/teens will “just want to be left alone.” Child Abuse happens in many different ways, however the end result for children and teenagers is always the same. Child abuse brings about feelings of anger, guilt, shame and depression. The person being abused usually feels that they are to blame for the abuse, as the person that is abusing them makes them feel that they are at fault. The abuser will often say, “you made me do this” or “if you would just have shut your mouth, I wouldn’t have hit you.” In addition, the abuser can come up with any number of “lies” to try and justify what they are doing. The most serious types of abuse are sexual and physical as they leave back physical evidence, however emotional abuse and neglect also constitute abuse and these types are much harder to spot. The types of abuse that we will define are sexual, physical, emotional/verbal, and child neglect.

Sexual abuse, by definition is intentionally exposing a child or teenager to sexual activity against their will. What this means is that a child/teen is forced to participate in some type of sexual activity whether it is touching, oral sex, pornography, or sexual intercourse. The person abusing them is usually a man and the child or teen is scared to tell anyone because often the person that is doing the abusing has either told them that what has happened is their fault or they have threatened to hurt them or someone they care about. In addition, the child/teen usually knows the person that has abused them and feels great shame and guilt for what has happened. In addition, most types of childhood sexual abuse are very subtle and involve inappropriate kissing, hugging, touching, and rubbing against a child or teenager that deceives the child/teen into thinking that maybe it is “all in my mind” or “maybe something is wrong with me, nobody else seems to notice.”

Physical abuse, is when someone strikes out at a child/teen and leaves physical evidence or an injury that is often inflicted intentionally or by an accident. Whether it is accidental or intentionally done, it leaves multiple fractures to a child at different times in their life. The physical signs of abuse are usually when parents/caregivers leave welts on a child, cause serious injuries or marks, or have “unexplained” bruises. Usually the person that is inflicting physical harm whether it is a parent or a caregiver, has difficulty with anger issues, has poor impulse control, and feels the need to control the person that they are abusing. Teens will often say of their abuser, “they use me as a punching bag”.

Emotional abuse, is the most difficult to detect, but often can be the most hurtful to a child. This type of abuse seems to last well into adulthood and leaves the most lasting scars. Often we hear, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me”. This is the farthest saying away from the truth that any of us have ever heard. This type of abuse interferes with a child/teens emotional development and they will often hear their parent or caregiver say hurtful

and hateful things to them such as: “you are ugly”, “you are fat”, “you are a loser”, “you will never amount to nothing.” These seem to be expressions that the emotional abuser uses over and over again. The words are meant to be hurtful and belittling and the intent of verbal/emotional abuse is usually a way for a parent/caregiver to express their anger or to try and control their child/teen. Either way, the intent is to hurt and this type of abuse leaves severe scars on children/teens and often leaves them with difficulties maintaining a healthy relationship into their adulthood.

The last type of abuse is a subset of child abuse called neglect. Neglect can be medical, psychological, or physical, and the child’s needs are not being met by their parents or a caregiver. Medical neglect is when a child or teen is not given the proper medical care, such as being taken to the doctor when they are sick or refusing to obtain proper medications for a physical condition. Psychological neglect includes inattention for a child/teen’s needs for affection, spousal abuse in the child’s presence, or letting the child/teen use alcohol or drugs with permission. Physical neglect is when a parent or caregiver does not meet the child/teen’s needs for clothing, cleanliness, food, or adequate shelter.

Whether the abuse is physical, emotional, sexual, or neglect, all types of abuse amount to an abuse of a parent or caregiver’s power. Any type of abuse that a child or teen endures is not their fault, although they are often led to believe that it has been caused by something that they have done or said. Children and teenagers that feel that they are being abused should report abuse to the Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-4-A-CHILD. Children and teens are usually very scared to report abuse that is occurring to them because they are very afraid of the repercussions of having done so and at times have been threatened by their abuser. There is help out there for you! If an adult that has even a suspicion that abuse or neglect is occurring to a child or a teenager should report it immediately as well. Often times, people do not want to “get involved” or will say, “but I am not sure it is actually happening” and do not report it should do so anyway. It is always better to be safe than sorry.

Kara T. Tamanini, M.S., LMHC
Author and Therapist
Founder of Kids Awareness Series
www.KidsAwarenessSeries.com