

Categories of abuse and their indicators

Physical abuse

Physical abuse may involve hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning, suffocating, or otherwise causing physical harm to a child. Physical harm may also be caused when a parent or carer fabricates the symptoms of, or deliberately induces, illness in a child.

Possible indicators of abuse may include bruising, fractures, mouth injuries indicative of force feeding, bite marks, burns and scalds, scars. It is possible to differentiate between non-accidental and accidental injuries in some cases.

Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse is the persistent emotional maltreatment of a child so as to cause severe and persistent adverse effects on the child's emotional development. It may involve conveying to children that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate or unvalued insofar as they meet the needs of another person. It may feature age or developmentally inappropriate expectations being imposed on children. These may include interactions that are beyond the child's developmental capability. It may involve seeing or hearing the ill treatment of others. It may involve serious bullying causing children frequently to feel frightened or in danger; or the exploitation or corruption of children.

Possible indicators include developmental delay, abnormal attachment between a child and parent/carer, aggressive behaviour towards others, low self-esteem and lack of confidence, withdrawal, difficulty relating to others, over-reaction to mistakes, fear of new situations, inappropriate emotional responses, self-harm, running away, depression, poor peer relationships.

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse entails forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities, whether or not they are aware of what is happening. It may involve physical contact, penetrative or non-penetrative acts. It may include involving children in looking at, or in the production of, pornographic material or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways. Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can also commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children.

Possible indicators include urinary infections, bleeding or soreness in the genital or anal areas, recurrent pain on passing urine or faeces, blood on underclothes, sexually transmitted infections, injuries to the genital or anal area, bruising to buttocks, abdomen and thighs, presence of semen on vagina, anus, external genitalia or clothing. Children may demonstrate sexual knowledge or behaviour that is inappropriate for their age/ stage of development or that is unusually explicit.

Neglect

Neglect is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological

needs. It is likely to result in serious impairment of the child's health and development. Neglect may occur during pregnancy as a result of maternal substance abuse. Once a child is born, neglect may involve a parent or carer failing to provide adequate food, clothing and shelter including exclusion from home or abandonment; failing to protect a child from physical harm or danger; failure to ensure adequate supervision including the use of inadequate care-takers, or the failure to ensure access to appropriate medical treatment. It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs.

Possible indicators include the child being underweight, frequently hungry, dirty, unkempt or inadequately clothed, having poor skin condition, sparse hair, recurrent and untreated infections or skin conditions, poor dental health, frequent accidents or injuries.