

What are the facts about child abuse?



- Children in the United States are more likely to be victimized violently in their own homes than on the streets. (*Current Trends in Child Abuse Prevention, Reporting, and Fatalities: The 1997 Fifty State Survey*. Chicago, IL: Prevent Child Abuse America, 1999)
- In 1997, 47 out of 1,000 children were reported abused or neglected and 15 out of 1,000 were confirmed as abused or neglected. (*Current Trends in Child Abuse Prevention, Reporting, and Fatalities: The 1997 Fifty State Survey*. Chicago, IL: Prevent Child Abuse America, 1999)
- Children under age 12 make up about one-quarter of all juvenile victims known to police and at least one-half of the juvenile victims of kidnaping and forcible sex offenses. Girls predominate as victims of sex offenses and kidnaping, but boys predominate as victims of all other crimes. (*Characteristics of Crimes Against Juveniles*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2000)
- More than 70 percent of reported sex offenses involve juvenile victims. (*Characteristics of Crimes Against Juveniles*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2000)
- Only 11 percent of the child victimizers in violent crimes are strangers. (*Characteristics of Crimes Against Juveniles*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2000)

Resources for Information and Assistance

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline
1-800-4-A-CHILD or 1-800-422-4453
www.childhelpusa.org

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children
1-800-843-5678
www.missingkids.org

National Center for Victims of Crime
1-800-FYI-CALL or 1-800-394-2255
www.ncvc.org

**National Children's Alliance
Regional Children's Advocacy Centers**
1-800-239-9950
www.nca-online.org

National Council on Child Abuse & Family Violence
1-800-222-2000
www.nccafv.org

National Organization for Victim Assistance
1-800-TRY-NOVA or 1-800-879-6682
www.try-nova.org

Office for Victims of Crime Resource Center
1-800-627-6872
TTY 1-877-712-9279
www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/ovcres/welcome.html

Prevent Child Abuse America
312-663-3520
www.preventchildabuse.org



Child Abuse Victimization

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Advocating for the Fair
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What is child abuse?

Child abuse is generally defined as any act or conduct that endangers or impairs a child's physical or emotional health or development. Child abuse includes any damage done to a child that cannot be reasonably explained and is often represented by an injury or series of injuries appearing to be intentional or deliberate in nature. Child abuse includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect (which is the failure to provide a minimum standard of care for a child's physical and emotional needs).

Although child abuse may not always lead to serious injury, one should assume that all child abuse experiences are harmful.

Child abuse is seldom a single event. Rather, it occurs with regularity, often increasing in violence. It crosses all boundaries of economics, race, ethnic heritage, and religious faith. A child abuser is usually closely related to the child, such as a parent, stepparent, or other caregiver. The child abuser is rarely a stranger. Child abuse happens in every community, rural and urban, throughout the Nation. It is a crime and should be addressed through child protective services and the legal system.

The degree of harm a child experiences as a result of child abuse depends on the nature of the abuse, the age of the child, and the child's environment. In homes in which child abuse occurs, fear, instability, and confusion replace the love, comfort, and nurturing that children need. Abused children live in constant fear of physical harm from a person who is supposed to care for and protect them. They may feel guilt at loving the abuser or blame themselves for causing the violence. Abused children may experience stress-related physical ailments and hearing and speech problems.

Child abuse is often found in homes in which domestic violence occurs. Children may be abused and threatened as a way of punishing and controlling the adult victim of domestic



violence. Sometimes, they may be injured unintentionally when acts of violence occur in their presence. Often, episodes of domestic violence expand to include attacks on children. However, even when children are not attacked directly, they experience serious emotional damage as a result of living in a violent household. Children who live in abusive environments believe that abusive behavior is acceptable, but it is not. Children from violent homes also have higher risks of alcohol or drug abuse and juvenile delinquency.

What can you do?

If your child, or any child, tells you that he or she has been abused, one of the most important things you can do is respond in a calm manner. Listen to the words and feelings of the child, and observe his or her body language. Try to find out what happened, and reassure the child that he or she has done nothing wrong. Let the child know that you will do whatever you can to keep him or her safe. It is better for you not to handle the situation on your own. Your community has resources that can help you and/or the child through this difficult time. Child abuse is against the law, so it is important to seek professional help and not intervene alone.

Parents have an obligation to keep their children safe and protect them whenever possible. If a family or household member or third party has been abusing your child, it is your responsibility to seek immediate medical attention for the child and make sure that the child is out of physical and emotional danger. The abuse should be reported to either local child protective services or law enforcement. On receiving your information, these authorities will determine the appropriate course of action. A parent who knows his or her child is abused but fails to respond can be held accountable under child protection laws for failing to protect the child.

Children experience the same emotional reactions as adults and can experience posttraumatic stress disorder.

Trauma in children can take years to manifest; therefore, it is important that victims of child abuse receive counseling as soon as possible after the abuse is disclosed.

Victims of child abuse may feel that they are bad and deserve the abuse. They usually have poor self-esteem. In addition to physical injuries that may be the result of abuse, child victims may develop eating disorders or sleep disturbances, including nightmares. They may develop speech disorders or developmental lags in their motor skills.

Many child victims demonstrate some form of self-destructive behavior. They may develop physical illnesses, such as asthma, ulcers, severe allergies, or recurring headaches. Also, they often experience irrational and persistent fears or hatreds and demonstrate either passive or aggressive behavioral extremes.

Children who have been abused need caring adults to help them recognize that they are not responsible for the violence in their homes and to help them find ways to grow past their present trauma into healthy adults. Caring adults must help abused children avoid a cycle of learned abusive patterns by teaching and modeling nonviolent methods of conflict resolution and helping them express their feelings in healthy ways.

Where can you get help?

Information, awareness, and understanding are crucial in beginning to deal with abuse in your child's life. Your community has victim assistance programs and counselors who are trained to work with child abuse victims. These advocates can provide information and a full range of victim support services, including applications for your state's crime victim compensation program, which can reimburse a victim's family for certain out-of-pocket expenses, such as medical and counseling expenses. To be eligible, you must report the crime to the authorities and cooperate with the criminal justice system.

Don't be afraid to ask for help.

