

# Understanding

## Child Maltreatment

Fact Sheet

2010

Child maltreatment includes all types of abuse and neglect of a child under the age of 18 by a parent, caregiver, or another person in a custodial role (e.g., clergy, coach, teacher). There are four common types of abuse.

- **Physical abuse** is the use of physical force, such as hitting, kicking, shaking, burning or other show of force against a child.
- **Sexual abuse** involves engaging a child in sexual acts. It includes fondling, rape, and exposing a child to other sexual activities.
- **Emotional abuse** refers to behaviors that harm a child's self-worth or emotional well-being. Examples include name calling, shaming, rejection, withholding love, and threatening.
- **Neglect** is the failure to meet a child's basic needs. These needs include housing, food, clothing, education, and access to medical care.



### Why is child maltreatment a public health problem?

The few cases of abuse or neglect we see in the news are only a small part of the problem. Many cases are not reported to police or social services. What we do know is that:

- 1,740 children died in the United States in 2008 from abuse and neglect.<sup>1</sup>
- 772,000 children were found to be victims of maltreatment by child protective services in 2008.<sup>1</sup>



### How does child maltreatment affect health?

Child maltreatment has a negative effect on health. Abused children often suffer physical injuries including cuts, bruises, burns, and broken bones. In addition, maltreatment causes stress that can disrupt early brain development.<sup>2</sup> Extreme stress can harm the development of the nervous and immune systems.<sup>2</sup> As a result, children who are abused or neglected are at higher risk for health problems as adults. These problems include alcoholism, depression, drug abuse, eating disorders, obesity, high-risk sexual behaviors, smoking, suicide, and certain chronic diseases.<sup>3,4</sup>



### Who is at risk for child maltreatment?

Some factors can increase the risk for abuse or neglect. The presence of these factors does not always mean that maltreatment will occur. Children are never to blame for the harm others do to them.

**Age.** Children under 4 years of age are at greatest risk for severe injury and death from abuse.

**Family environment.** Abuse and neglect can occur in families where there is a great deal of stress. The stress can result from a family history of violence, drug or alcohol abuse, poverty, and chronic health problems. Families that do not have nearby friends, relatives, and other social support are also at risk.

**Community.** On-going violence in the community may create an environment where child abuse is accepted.



[www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention)



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## How can we prevent child maltreatment?

The ultimate goal is to stop child maltreatment before it starts. Strategies that support parents and teach positive parenting skills are very important. Positive parenting skills include good communication, appropriate discipline, and responding to children's physical and emotional needs. Programs to prevent child maltreatment also improve parent-child relationships and provide parents with social support.

Programs for parents can take many different forms. They may occur in parents' homes, in schools, in medical or mental health clinics, or in other community settings. Programs may involve one-on-one or group sessions.



## How does CDC approach prevention?

CDC uses a 4-step approach to address public health problems like child maltreatment.

### Step 1: Define the problem

Before we can prevent child maltreatment, we need to know how big the problem is, where it is, and whom it affects. CDC learns about a problem by gathering and studying data. These data are critical because they help decision makers send resources where they are needed most.

### Step 2: Identify risk and protective factors

It is not enough to know that child maltreatment is affecting a certain group of children in a certain area. We also need to know why. CDC conducts and supports research to answer this question. We can then develop programs to reduce or get rid of risk factors.

### Step 3: Develop and test prevention strategies

Using information gathered in research, CDC develops and evaluates strategies to prevent child maltreatment.

### Step 4: Ensure widespread adoption

In this final step, CDC shares the best prevention strategies. CDC may also provide funding or technical help so communities can adopt these strategies.

*For a list of CDC activities, see [www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pub/PreventingCM.html](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pub/PreventingCM.html).*



## Where can I learn more?

To report abuse or get help, contact the National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453).

### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

[www.cdc.gov/injury](http://www.cdc.gov/injury)

### Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families

[www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb)

### Child Welfare Information Gateway

[www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)

### FRIENDS National Resource Center

[www.friendsnrc.org](http://www.friendsnrc.org)

### National Scientific Council on the Developing Child

[www.developingchild.net](http://www.developingchild.net)



## References

1. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families. Child Maltreatment 2008 [online]. Washington (DC): Government Printing Office; 2010. [cited 2010 Apr 8]. Available from: [www.acf.hhs.gov](http://www.acf.hhs.gov).
2. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. Excessive stress disrupts the architecture of the developing brain, Working Paper No. 3 [online]. 2005 [cited 2008 Feb 20]. Available from: [www.developingchild.net](http://www.developingchild.net).
3. Felitti V, Anda R, Nordenberg D, Williamson D, Spitz A, Edwards V, et al. Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 1998;14(4):245-58.
4. Runyan D, Wattam C, Ikeda R, Hassan F, Ramiro L. Child abuse and neglect by parents and caregivers. In: Krug E, Dahlberg LL, Mercy JA, Zwi AB, Lozano R, editors. *World Report on Violence and Health*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization; 2002. p. 59-86.

For more information, please contact:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
National Center for Injury Prevention and Control

1-800-CDC-INFO • [www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention) • [cdcinfo@cdc.gov](mailto:cdcinfo@cdc.gov)