

Child Abuse, Neglect and Mental Health

About Child Abuse and Neglect

Child abuse or neglect is the harmful mistreatment of a child. This handout summarises the potential impacts of child abuse or neglect on a person's mental health and wellbeing.

Physical abuse – physically hurting or injuring a child, for example: shaking, hitting or beating a child, throwing or pushing them, cutting or burning a child.

Emotional or Psychological abuse – harming a child's social and emotional wellbeing and development, for example: by rejection, isolation, harsh criticism, lack of affection, or ridicule.

Sexual abuse – making a child watch or take part in any sexual act, for example: touching or being touched in a sexual way, having any kind of sex, or posing for sexual photos or films.

Neglect – failing to meet a child's basic needs and keep them safe, for example: not providing a child with adequate food, clothes, adult supervision, health care, or education.

Domestic violence – subjecting a child to living in a situation where there is violence or abuse against the child, or against other people, such as a parent, brother or sister.

Abuse, neglect or violence can occur in any family or household. However the risk is higher when people have health or social problems that create difficulty for the family. Difficult family situations may include physical or mental illness or disability in the family, conflict and arguments, unemployment, money problems, housing issues, parental drug or alcohol abuse.

Why is this important for mental health and wellbeing?

Positive social and emotional development in the early years is important in laying the foundations for mental health and wellbeing later in life. For optimal social and emotional development, children need the opportunity to develop secure attachment relationships within a safe and supportive environment.

Children who experience abuse, neglect or domestic violence are at higher risk of emotional or behavioural difficulties. The impact on the child's feelings and behaviour may be enough to warrant the diagnosis of a disorder in childhood, such as anxiety or depression. The effects of child abuse, neglect or domestic violence may include:

- Being anxious, withdrawn or frightened
- Having an insecure or disorganised attachment style
- Experiencing feelings of guilt and confusion
- Having problems with a sense of self and self-esteem
- Showing anger, aggression, or challenging behaviour
- Being at risk of anxiety, depression or other disorders.

In the longer term, people who have experienced abuse, neglect or domestic violence also have a higher risk of developing a mental illness in adolescence or in adulthood. There is a higher risk of anti-social behaviour, risk-taking behaviour, abuse of drugs or alcohol, conduct disorder, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, personality disorders, self-harm and suicidal behaviour.

What should I look for?

Warning signs of abuse or neglect in children may include:

- Significant changes in feelings or behaviour, e.g. becoming anxious or aggressive
- Signs of poor care, such as dirty skin or hair, poorly kept clothing, lack of food
- Frequent bruising, injuries or illness, without a good explanation
- Sexual behaviour or interest not appropriate to their age
- Acting out situations of abuse or violence when playing
- Talking, writing or drawing about being hurt, frightened or abused.

What should I do?

If you suspect a child has been abused, neglected or exposed to violence – or even if you think there is a significant risk because of a family situation – then you have a duty of care toward that child. You should not investigate the situation yourself, but you should report your concerns.

- Observe the child's behaviour and wellbeing carefully.
- Make a list of any specific issues that you are concerned about.
- Write down any information you know about the family and home situation.
- Discuss with your supervisor, coordinator or service director in the first instance.

Your supervisor, coordinator or service director will assist you to work through your concerns and if necessary make a formal report to the government department responsible for child protection in your state or territory. In some states and territories, children's services staff are required by law to make a formal report to the relevant department (mandatory reporting).

If your supervisor does not report the situation but you are still concerned about the safety of the child, you can contact the relevant government department directly. For contact details in your state or territory, visit <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/resources/state.html> (retrieved 15 May, 2009).

Where can I find out more?

The Response Ability website (www.responseability.org) has more detailed fact sheets on a range of issues affecting children and families, listed under *Education and Children's Services*.

Department of Community Services (2002). *Domestic violence and its impact on children's development*. Ashfield, NSW: NSW Department of Community Services. Retrieved 15 May, 2009, from www.community.nsw.gov.au.

Department of Community Services (2005). *Neglect: Key issues*. Ashfield, NSW: Department of Community Services. Retrieved 15 May, 2009, from www.community.nsw.gov.au.

Higgins, D., Bromfield, L., Richardson, N., Holzer, P., & Berlyn, C. (2009). *Mandatory reporting of child abuse*. Australian Institute of Family Studies. Retrieved 15 May, 2009, from <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/sheets/rs3/rs3.html>.

National Child Protection Clearinghouse website: www.aifs.gov.au/nch.