

# HOW YOU CAN HELP SOMEONE WHO IS BEING ABUSED OR NEGLECTED

**Every child deserves** a safe, loving family and to have his or her basic needs—such as food, clothing, and shelter—met. Most parents try their best to provide these things for their children, but unfortunately, not all parents do, and not all children are cared for and safe. Some children may not be safe because their parent or other caregiver (such as a grandparent, aunt or uncle, or babysitter) is harming them. Others may not be safe because there isn't a responsible adult to watch or take care of them. When children aren't safe because of what a parent or other caregiver does or doesn't do, this could be child abuse or neglect. This tip sheet will provide you with more information about what child abuse and neglect is and what to do if you or a friend isn't safe.



## WHAT'S INSIDE...

- **What is** child abuse or neglect?
- **How do I know** if someone is being abused or neglected?
- **What should I do** if someone is being abused or neglected?



# WHAT IS CHILD ABUSE OR NEGLECT?

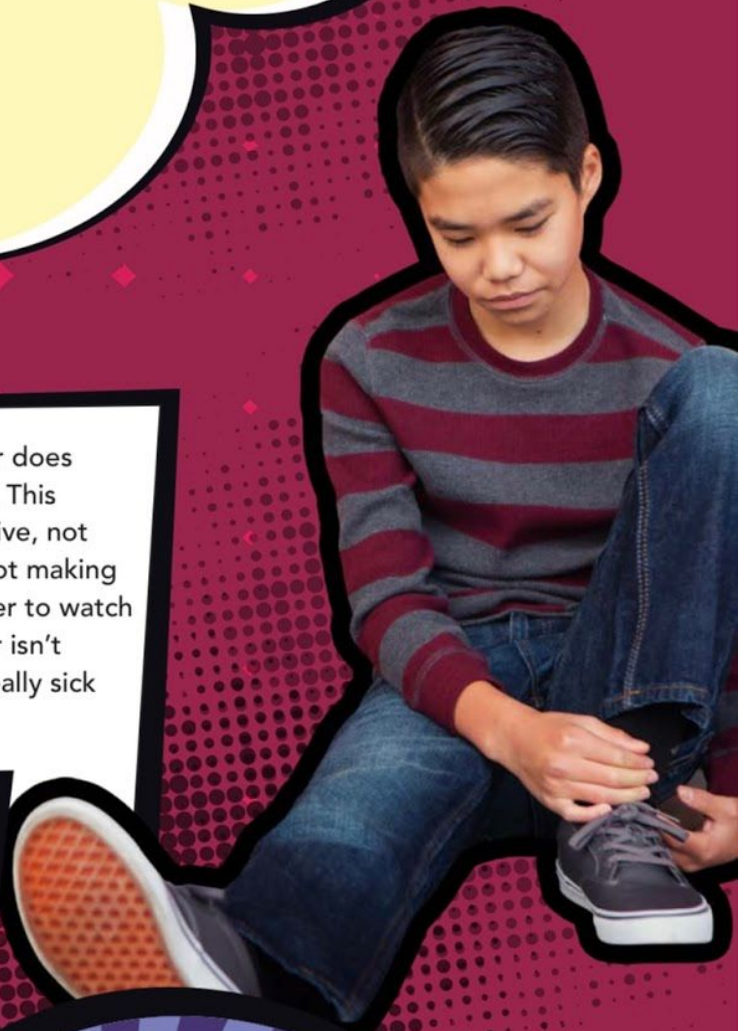
Child abuse or neglect is when a parent or other caregiver does something that harms—or will likely harm—a child. This also includes times when a parent or other caregiver fails to do things that will keep a child safe and healthy. Examples of child abuse and neglect are often organized into **four categories**:

- **Physical abuse** is when a parent or other caregiver seriously hurts or injures a child. This could include hitting a child with an object, burning a child, or in other ways purposely hurting a child. It doesn't include accidents, like if a parent tripped and fell on a child.

- **Neglect** is when a parent or other caregiver does not make sure a child's basic needs are met. This could include not providing a safe place to live, not providing enough food to stay healthy, or not making sure there is a trustworthy adult or babysitter to watch the child when the parent or other caregiver isn't home. It also could include not bringing a really sick child to the doctor.

- **Sexual abuse** is when a parent or other adult inappropriately touches a child or has a child inappropriately touch them. This includes touching "private" areas, but it also could include other things. For example, it could include the adult taking or showing sexually inappropriate photos or videos to a child.

- **Emotional abuse** is when a parent or other caregiver repeatedly puts down, makes fun of, threatens, ignores, or does other things that harm a child's emotional health.



# HOW DO I KNOW IF SOMEONE IS BEING ABUSED OR NEGLECTED?

It's often really hard—even for adults—to know if a child is being harmed. Sometimes we may see it happening with our own eyes, such as if we notice an adult hitting a child. But other times we may only see signs of what *could* be happening. These signs may mean a child is being hurt by an adult, but there could be other causes, too.

The list below gives a few signs that a child may be abused or neglected, but you should remember two things. First, a child who shows these signs may not necessarily be abused or neglected by an adult, but these signs may be reasons to be concerned and for you to talk with an adult. (This will be explained more later.) Second, this list is not complete. There are many other signs of abuse and neglect, too.

## These are examples of signs a child may be abused or neglected or otherwise needs help:

- The child has injuries (bruises, burns, cuts, etc.) that he or she can't or won't explain, or the explanation doesn't make sense.
- The child is frightened of his or her parents or other adults.
- The child hurts pets or other animals.
- The child spends a lot of time at home without a parent or other caregiver (if the child is young).
- The child uses alcohol or drugs.
- The child avoids going home or spending time with a particular adult.
- The child often comes to school in dirty clothes.

Sometimes you also may just get a feeling that something isn't right about how a parent or other caregiver treats a child or how a friend is acting. If you are concerned about someone, you should talk to a trusted adult, such as a parent, teacher, or school counselor. We'll explain more about that in the next section.

The child also may tell you he or she is being harmed. If someone does tell you he or she is being abused or neglected, **here are a few tips about how you can react:**

- Listen to what the child has to say.
- Tell the child you care and want to help.
- Let the child know he or she is not alone.
- Let the child know what is happening is not his or her fault.
- Encourage the child to talk to a trusted adult to get help.



POSSIBLE  
SIGNS



# WHAT SHOULD I DO IF SOMEONE IS BEING ABUSED OR NEGLECTED?

If you suspect or know that a child is being abused or neglected, there are ways you can help. If you or someone else is in immediate and serious danger, you should call 911. In other cases, you can find a trusted adult to talk with. **You don't need to be 100 percent sure that a child is being abused or neglected to talk with someone.** You should share your worries, and the adult can help determine what to do next. You also can encourage the child to talk to a trusted adult.

Many times, there is a trusted adult already in your life—such as a parent, teacher, school counselor, or coach—that you can approach. You can tell this trusted adult what your concerns are or what you've witnessed. Give a complete, honest description of what you know. This may be a difficult conversation to have, but remember the reason you're having it: to keep someone (maybe you) safe. The adult can help figure out what can be done.

Some children and youth may not have an adult that they trust enough to talk with about their concerns, or they may have told an adult who does not believe them. In this case, there are national and local hotlines they can call for help. The Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline has counselors available 24 hours every day to talk with children and adults about abuse and neglect. To reach a Childhelp counselor, call **1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)** and then press 1. For more information about Childhelp, you can visit <https://www.childhelp.org/hotline/resources-kids/>.



# OTHER QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT HAVE

Here are answers to other questions that might come up in these situations:

## **Isn't telling someone else just tattling or snitching?**

No. There's a big difference between *telling* someone about a child who is being hurt and *tattling*. Children usually tattle to get another child in trouble for not following a rule. Telling someone about abuse or neglect—or even bullying—is about keeping a child safe. You aren't tattling when you report abuse or neglect to someone.

## **What will happen after I tell someone?**

After you talk with a trusted adult or call a hotline, that person may contact a local agency, often called child protective services, or CPS. The workers at CPS are trained to help make sure that children and families are safe. When they receive a call, CPS workers review the information and figure out if they need to investigate. If so, they may talk with the family, the child, or others to help determine what's making the child unsafe. CPS workers can help parents or other caregivers get services, education, or other assistance so they can learn to better care for their children in their own homes. If a child is in danger at that moment or has been seriously hurt by a parent or other caregiver, the CPS worker may need to have the child stay with another relative or in foster care, which is a temporary home for the child to live. In these situations, the CPS worker will work with the family so that the child can return to live with the parent or other caregiver when CPS determines they will be safe and properly treated.

## **Will I get in trouble for telling someone?**

If you're being honest about what you've noticed, you won't get in trouble, even if the child was not actually being abused or neglected. You don't have to be absolutely sure about whether a child is being abused or neglected when you talk with someone about your concerns. You told someone because you really thought the child was in danger. However, if someone purposely lies to CPS when reporting abuse or neglect, they could get in trouble.

## **Will the other child get upset with me for telling someone else?**

Children often tell each other secrets, or you may see or hear something that was supposed to be a secret. A friend or classmate may tell you they are being harmed and ask you not to tell anyone. When a child is being harmed, this is a secret that must be shared, and telling a trusted adult is the right move. It's possible the child could be upset you told, but he or she is probably feeling a lot of different emotions at that time. The child may feel scared because he or she is being hurt. The child may feel ashamed or embarrassed that someone else knows about what happened. The child may be confused because someone he or she cares about is harming them. The child may feel guilty because he or she told someone else about "family business." All these feelings are normal, but you should still tell someone. By talking with a trusted adult, you are showing the child that you care, and it could lead to the family getting help to keep everyone safe.

## **Why do parents abuse or neglect their children?**

There are many reasons why a parent or other caregiver may abuse or neglect a child, but no matter what, it's never the child's fault. Adults who hurt children may have trouble controlling their anger. They also may not know about children's needs or have unrealistic expectations about how children grow and develop (for example, thinking a baby should be potty trained by age 1). Adults also may have problems—such as using drugs or having mental health issues—that affect how they make decisions. Of course, there are many other reasons an adult may abuse or neglect a child, and not every parent who has the problems mentioned here will harm their children. No matter the reason an adult harms a child, it is important that the family receives help to make sure it stops.

# TOP TAKEAWAYS



- 1** Every child deserves a safe, loving family and to have his or her basic needs—such as food, clothing, and shelter—met.
- 2** Child abuse or neglect is when a parent or other caregiver does something that harms—or will likely harm—a child or when a parent or other caregiver fails to do things that will keep a child safe and healthy.
- 3** Help is available. If you or someone else is in immediate and serious danger, you should call 911. In other cases, find a trusted adult to talk with or call the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at **1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)** and then press 1.
- 4** Telling someone about abuse or neglect—or even bullying—is about keeping a child safe. You aren't tattling when you tell someone about abuse or neglect.



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau

