



Definitions and signs of child abuse

April 2022

What is child abuse?

Child abuse happens when a person harms a child. It can be physical, sexual or emotional, but can also involve neglect.

Children may be abused by:

- family members
- friends
- people working or volunteering in organisational or community settings
- people they know
- strangers.

General signs of abuse

Children experiencing abuse often experience more than one type of abuse over a period of time.

Children who experience abuse may be afraid to tell anybody about the abuse. They may struggle with feelings of guilt, shame or confusion – particularly if the abuser is a parent, caregiver or other close family member or friend.

Many of the signs that a child is being abused are the same regardless of the type of abuse. Anyone working with children or young people needs to be able to recognise the signs. These include a child:

- being afraid of particular places or making excuses to avoid particular people
- knowing about or being involved in ‘adult issues’ which are inappropriate for their age or stage of development, for example alcohol, drugs and/or sexual behaviour
- having angry outbursts or behaving aggressively towards others
- becoming withdrawn or appearing anxious, clingy or depressed
- self-harming or having thoughts about suicide
- showing changes in eating habits or developing eating disorders
- regularly experiencing nightmares or sleep problems
- regularly wetting the bed or soiling their clothes
- running away or regularly going missing from home or care
- not receiving adequate medical attention after injuries.

These signs do not necessarily mean that a child is being abused. There may well be other reasons for changes in a child’s behaviour such as a bereavement or relationship problems between parents or carers. If you have any concerns about a child’s wellbeing, you should report them following your organisation’s safeguarding and child protection procedures.

[Find out more about recognising and responding to abuse](#)

Physical abuse

What is physical abuse?

Physical abuse happens when a child is deliberately hurt, causing physical harm. It can involve hitting, kicking, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or suffocating.

It's also physical abuse if a parent or carer makes up or causes the symptoms of illness in children. For example, they may give them medicine they don't need, making them unwell. This is known as fabricated or induced illness (FI).

Spotting the signs of physical abuse

All children have trips, falls and accidents which may cause cuts, bumps and bruises. These injuries tend to affect bony areas of their body such as elbows, knees and shins and are not usually a cause for concern.

Injuries that are more likely to indicate physical abuse include:

Bruising

- bruises on babies who are not yet crawling or walking
- bruises on the cheeks, ears, palms, arms and feet
- bruises on the back, buttocks, tummy, hips and backs of legs
- multiple bruises in clusters, usually on the upper arms or outer thighs
- bruising which looks like it has been caused by fingers, a hand or an object, like a belt or shoe
- large oval-shaped bite marks.

Burns or scalds

- any burns which have a clear shape of an object, for example cigarette burns
- burns to the backs of hands, feet, legs, genitals or buttocks.

Other signs of physical abuse include multiple injuries (such as bruising, fractures) inflicted at different times.

If a child is frequently injured, and if the bruises or injuries are unexplained or the explanation doesn't match the injury, this should be investigated. It's also concerning if there is a delay in seeking medical help for a child who has been injured.

[Find out more about physical abuse](#)

Neglect

What is neglect?

Neglect is not meeting a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs. This can result in serious damage to their health and development. Neglect may involve a parent or carer not:

- providing adequate food, clothing or shelter
- supervising a child or keeping them safe from harm or danger (including leaving them with unsuitable carers)
- making sure the child receives appropriate health and/or dental care
- making sure the child receives a suitable education
- meeting the child's basic emotional needs – this is known as emotional neglect.

Neglect is the most common type of child abuse. It often happens at the same time as other types of abuse.

Spotting the signs of neglect

Neglect can be difficult to identify. Isolated signs may not mean that a child is suffering neglect, but multiple and persistent signs over time could indicate a serious problem.

Some of these signs include:

- children who appear hungry - they may not have lunch money or even try to steal food
- children who appear dirty or smelly
- children whose clothes are inadequate for the weather conditions
- children who are left alone or unsupervised for long periods or at a young age
- children who have untreated injuries, health or dental problems
- children with poor language, communication or social skills for their stage of development
- children who live in an unsuitable home environment.

[Find out more about neglect](#)

Sexual abuse

What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse is forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities. It doesn't necessarily involve violence and the child may not be aware that what is happening is abuse.

Child sexual abuse can involve contact abuse and non-contact abuse.

Contact abuse happens when the abuser makes physical contact with the child. It includes:

- sexual touching of any part of the body whether the child is wearing clothes or not
- rape or penetration by putting an object or body part inside a child's mouth, vagina or anus

- forcing or encouraging a child to take part in sexual activity
- making a child take their clothes off or touch someone else's genitals.

Non-contact abuse involves non-touching activities. It can happen online or in person and includes:

- encouraging or forcing a child to watch or hear sexual acts
- making a child masturbate while others watch
- not taking proper measures to prevent a child being exposed to sexual activities by others
- showing pornography to a child
- making, viewing or distributing child abuse images
- allowing someone else to make, view or distribute child abuse images.
- meeting a child following online sexual grooming with the intent of abusing them.

Online sexual abuse includes:

- persuading or forcing a child to send or post sexually explicit images of themselves, this is sometimes referred to as sexting
- persuading or forcing a child to take part in sexual activities via a webcam or smartphone
- having sexual conversations with a child by text or online.

Abusers may threaten to send sexually explicit images, video or copies of sexual conversations to the young person's friends and family unless they take part in other sexual activity. Images or videos may continue to be shared long after the abuse has stopped.

Abusers will often try to build an emotional connection with a child in order to gain their trust for the purposes of sexual abuse. This is known as grooming.

Spotting the signs of sexual abuse

There may be physical signs that a child has suffered sexual abuse. These include:

- anal or vaginal soreness or itching
- bruising or bleeding near the genital area
- discomfort when walking or sitting down
- an unusual discharge
- sexually transmitted infections (STI)
- pregnancy.

Changes in the child's mood or behaviour may also cause concern. They may want to avoid spending time with specific people. In particular, the child may show sexual behaviour that is inappropriate for their age.

For example:

- they could use sexual language or know things about sex that you wouldn't expect them to
- they might become sexually active or pregnant at a young age.

[Find out more about child sexual abuse](#)

Child sexual exploitation

What is child sexual exploitation?

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a type of sexual abuse. Young people may be coerced or groomed into exploitative situations and relationships. They may be given things such as gifts, money, drugs, alcohol, status or affection in exchange for taking part in sexual activities.

Young people may be tricked into believing they're in a loving, consensual relationship. They often trust their abuser and don't understand that they're being abused. They may depend on their abuser or be too scared to tell anyone what's happening. They might be invited to parties and given drugs and alcohol before being sexually exploited. They can also be groomed and exploited online.

Some children and young people are trafficked into or within the UK for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Sexual exploitation can also happen to young people in gangs (Berelowitz et al, 2013).

Child sexual exploitation can involve violent, humiliating and degrading sexual assaults and involve multiple perpetrators.

[Find out more about grooming](#)

Spotting the signs of child sexual exploitation

Sexual exploitation can be very difficult to identify. Young people who are being sexually exploited may:

- go missing from home, care or education
- be involved in abusive relationships
- hang out with groups of older people
- be involved in gangs or anti-social groups
- have older boyfriends or girlfriends
- spend time at places of concern, such as hotels or known brothels
- be involved in petty crime such as shoplifting
- have access to drugs and alcohol
- have new things such as clothes and mobile phones, which they aren't able to easily explain
- have unexplained physical injuries.

[Find out more about child sexual exploitation](#)

Harmful sexual behaviour

What is harmful sexual behaviour?

Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) is developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour which is displayed by children and young people and which may be harmful or abusive. It may also be referred to as sexually harmful behaviour or sexualised behaviour.

HSB encompasses a range of behaviour, which can be displayed towards younger children, peers, older children or adults. It is harmful to the children and young people who display it, as well as the people it is directed towards.

HSB can include:

- using sexually explicit words and phrases
- inappropriate touching
- using sexual violence or threats
- sexual activity with other children or adults.

Sexual behaviour between children is considered harmful if one of the children is much older – particularly if there is more than two years' difference in age or if one of the children is pre-pubescent and the other isn't (Davies, 2012). However, a younger child can abuse an older child, particularly if they have power over them – for example, if the older child is disabled (Rich, 2011).

Spotting the signs of harmful sexual behaviour

It's normal for children to show signs of sexual behaviour at each stage in their development. Children also develop at different rates and some may be slightly more or less advanced than other children in their age group. Behaviours which might be concerning depend on the child's age and the situation.

[Find out more about harmful sexual behaviour](#)

Emotional abuse

What is emotional abuse?

Emotional abuse involves:

- humiliating, putting down or regularly criticising a child
- shouting at or threatening a child or calling them names
- mocking a child or making them perform degrading acts
- constantly blaming or scapegoating a child for things which are not their fault
- trying to control a child's life and not recognising their individuality
- not allowing a child to have friends or develop socially
- pushing a child too hard or not recognising their limitations
- manipulating a child
- exposing a child to distressing events or interactions
- persistently ignoring a child
- being cold and emotionally unavailable during interactions with a child
- not being positive or encouraging to a child or praising their achievements and successes.

Spotting the signs of emotional abuse

There aren't usually any obvious physical signs of emotional abuse but you may spot changes in a child's actions or emotions.

Some children are naturally quiet and self-contained whilst others are more open and affectionate. Mood swings and challenging behaviour are also a normal part of growing up for teenagers and children going through puberty. Be alert to behaviours which appear to be out of character for the individual child or are particularly unusual for their stage of development.

Babies and pre-school children who are being emotionally abused may:

- be overly-affectionate towards strangers or people they haven't known for very long
- not appear to have a close relationship with their parent, for example when being taken to or collected from nursery
- lack confidence or become wary or anxious
- be unable to play
- be aggressive or nasty towards other children and animals.

Older children may:

- use language, act in a way or know about things that you wouldn't expect for their age
- struggle to control strong emotions or have extreme outbursts
- seem isolated from their parents
- lack social skills or have few, if any, friends
- fear making mistakes
 - fear their parent being approached regarding their behaviour
 - self-harm.

[Find out more about emotional abuse](#)

Domestic abuse

What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse is any type of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between people who are, or who have been in a relationship, regardless of gender or sexuality. It can include physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or financial abuse.

Exposure to domestic abuse is child abuse. Children can be directly involved in incidents of domestic abuse or they may be harmed by seeing or hearing abuse happening. Children in homes where there is domestic abuse are also at risk of other types of abuse or neglect.

Spotting the signs of domestic abuse

It can be difficult to tell if domestic abuse is happening, because abusers can act very differently when other people are around.

Children who witness domestic abuse may:

- become aggressive
- display anti-social behaviour
- suffer from depression or anxiety
- not do as well at school - due to difficulties at home or disruption of moving to and from refuges.

[Find out more about domestic abuse](#)

Bullying and cyberbullying

What are bullying and cyberbullying?

Bullying is when individuals or groups seek to harm, intimidate or coerce someone who is perceived to be vulnerable.

Bullying includes:

- verbal abuse, such as name calling
- non-verbal abuse, such as hand signs or glaring
- emotional abuse, such as threatening, intimidating or humiliating someone
- exclusion, such as ignoring or isolating someone
- undermining, by constant criticism or spreading rumours
- controlling or manipulating someone
- racial, sexual or homophobic bullying
- physical assaults, such as hitting and pushing
- making silent, hoax or abusive calls.

Bullying can happen anywhere – at school, at home or online. When bullying happens online it can involve social networks, games and mobile devices. Online bullying can also be known as cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying includes:

- sending threatening or abusive text messages
- creating and sharing embarrassing images or videos
- 'trolling' - sending menacing or upsetting messages on social networks, chat rooms or online games
- excluding children from online games, activities or friendship groups
- setting up hate sites or groups about a particular child
- encouraging young people to self-harm
- voting for or against someone in an abusive poll
- creating fake accounts, hijacking or stealing online identities to embarrass a young person or cause trouble using their name.

Spotting the signs of bullying and cyberbullying

It can be hard to know whether or not a child is being bullied. They might not tell anyone because they're scared the bullying will get worse. They might also think that the bullying is their fault.

No one sign indicates for certain that a child's being bullied, but you should look out for:

- belongings getting 'lost' or damaged
- physical injuries such as unexplained bruises
- being afraid to go to school, being mysteriously 'ill' each morning, or skipping school
- not doing as well at school
- asking for, or stealing, money (to give to a bully)
- being nervous, losing confidence or becoming distressed and withdrawn
- problems with eating or sleeping
- bullying others.

[Find out more about bullying](#)

[Find out more about Online abuse](#)

Child trafficking

What is child trafficking?

Child trafficking is child abuse. It involves recruiting and moving children who are then exploited. Many children are trafficked into the UK from overseas, but children can also be trafficked from one part of the UK to another.

Children may be trafficked for:

- child sexual exploitation
- benefit fraud
- forced marriage
- domestic servitude such as cleaning, childcare, cooking
- forced labour in factories or agriculture
- criminal exploitation such as cannabis cultivation, pickpocketing, begging, transporting, drugs, selling pirated DVDs and bag theft.

Children who are trafficked experience many forms of abuse and neglect. Physical, sexual and emotional abuse is often used to control them and they're also likely to suffer physical and emotional neglect.

Child trafficking can require a network of organised criminals who recruit, transport and exploit children and young people. Some people in the network might not be directly involved in trafficking a child but play a part in other ways, such as falsifying documents, bribery, owning or renting premises or money laundering (Europol, 2011). Child trafficking can also be organised by individuals and the children's own families.

Traffickers trick, force or persuade children to leave their homes. They use grooming techniques to gain the

trust of a child, family or community. Although these are methods used by traffickers, coercion, violence or threats don't need to be proven in cases of child trafficking - a child cannot legally consent to their exploitation so child trafficking only requires evidence of movement and exploitation.

Modern slavery is another term which may be used in relation to child trafficking. Modern slavery encompasses slavery, servitude, forced and compulsory labour and human trafficking (HM Government, 2014). The [Modern Slavery Act](#) passed in 2015 in England and Wales categorises offences of slavery, servitude, forced or compulsory labour and human trafficking.

Spotting the signs of child trafficking

Signs that a child has been trafficked may not be obvious but you might notice unusual behaviour or events.

Children who have been trafficked may:

- have to do excessive housework chores
- rarely leave the house and have limited freedom of movement
- not have any documents (or have falsified documents)
- give a prepared story which is very similar to stories given by other children
- be unable or reluctant to give details of accommodation or personal details
- not be registered with a school or a GP practice
- have a history with missing links and unexplained moves
- be cared for by adults who are not their parents or carers
- not have a good quality relationship with their adult carers
- be one among a number of unrelated children found at one address
- receive unexplained or unidentified phone calls whilst in a care placement or temporary accommodation.

There are also signs that an adult is involved in child trafficking, such as:

- making multiple visa applications for different children
- acting as a guarantor for multiple visa applications for children
- having previously acted as the guarantor on visa applications for visitors who have not left the UK when the visa expired.

[Find out more about child trafficking and modern slavery](#)

Female genital mutilation

What is female genital mutilation?

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is the partial or total removal of external female genitalia for non-medical reasons. It's also known as female circumcision or cutting.

The age at which FGM is carried out varies. It may be carried out when a child is new-born, during childhood or adolescence, just before marriage or during pregnancy (Home Office et al, 2016).

FGM is child abuse. There are no medical reasons to carry out FGM. It's dangerous and a criminal offence.

Spotting the signs of female genital mutilation

A child at risk of FGM may not know what's going to happen. But they might talk about or you may become aware of:

- a long holiday abroad or going 'home' to visit family
- relative or cutter visiting from abroad
- a special occasion or ceremony to 'become a woman' or get ready for marriage
- a female relative being cut – a sister, cousin or an older female relative such as a mother or aunt
- missing school repeatedly or running away from home.

A child who has had FGM may:

- have difficulty walking, standing or sitting
- spend longer in the bathroom or toilet
- appear withdrawn, anxious or depressed
- have unusual behaviour after an absence from school or college
- be particularly reluctant to undergo normal medical examinations
- ask for help, but may not be explicit about the problem due to embarrassment or fear.

Reporting requirements

Regulated health and social care professionals and teachers in England and Wales must report 'known' cases of FGM in under-18s to the police (Home Office, 2016).

[Find out more about FGM](#)

References

Berelowitz, S., Clifton, J., Firmin, C., Gulyurtlu, S. and Edwards, G. (2013) [“If only someone had listened”](#): [Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups](#). London: Office of the Children’s Commissioner.

<<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/if-only-someone-had-listened/>>

Davies, J. (2012) Working with sexually harmful behaviour. *Counselling Children and Young People*, March 2012: 20-23.

Europol (2011) Knowledge product: trafficking in human beings in the European Union. The Hague: Europol.

HM Government (2014) [Modern slavery strategy](#). London: HM Government.

<<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/modern-slavery-strategy>>

Home Office (2016) [Mandatory reporting of female genital mutilation – procedural information](#) (PDF). London: Home Office.

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/573782/FGM_Mandatory_Reporting_-_procedural_information_nov16_FINAL.pdf>

Home Office, Department for Education and Department of Health (2016) [Multi- agency statutory guidance on female genital mutilation](#). London: Home Office.

<<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/multi-agency-statutory-guidance-on-female-genital-mutilation>>

Rich, P. (2011), *Understanding, assessing and rehabilitating juvenile sexual offenders*, 2nd ed. New Jersey, Wiley.