

Understanding Abuse

CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Among today's saddest news reports are those about the battering and neglect of children. Nationally, about two million cases of child abuse are reported annually, with perhaps twice as many going unreported. Each year an estimated 2,000 children die from abuse inflicted by parents or adult caregivers. In Iowa, 20,866 cases of child abuse were reported during 1993, and 6,386 cases of abuse were found to have occurred.

We all bear the social and financial aftermath of this abuse. Child abuse can occur in all families and communities. Fortunately, there are now many successful prevention and treatment programs. Working together, we can help break this tragic cycle of abuse and neglect.

Child abuse and neglect: What are they?

Child abuse can be physical, such as when a child is injured on purpose or mistreated sexually. Emotional abuse includes placing excessive or unrealistic demands on a child. Verbal abuse includes name calling, unnecessary criticism and excessive yelling—all of which damage a child's self-esteem. Physical and emotional bullying by other children also can be abusive. Child neglect includes failing to provide a child with food, shelter, supervision, education or medical care.

Who mistreats children

Most people believe that individuals who were abused as children grow up to be abusive parents. However, recent research suggests that only 20 to 30 percent of abuse victims actually abuse their own children.

When abuse is less severe, occurs before adolescence, and happens over a short period of time, the victims are much less likely to become abusive parents. Also when only one parent has abused the child and when the other parent provides a supportive relationship, the child is less likely to abuse as an adult.

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
University Extension

Ames, Iowa

Abusers of children can be parents, siblings, friends, relatives, or adults who work with children. People who abuse children come from all economic levels and backgrounds. Often they may have unrealistic expectations of children and may not understand normal child development. Special-needs children are especially vulnerable since they place extra demands on parents and caregivers. Stress and frequent crises contribute to the potential for abuse. Adults with marital, financial, or other problems are less patient with children and may turn their frustration against the children. Substance abuse and domestic violence often are intertwined in the child abuse cycle.

We need to understand that people who abuse children usually do not dislike children. In fact, abusers often have genuine love and concern for their children. They simply get caught up in a cycle of frustration and violence and do not know how to change their behavior. Both the abuser and the abused child need help. With education and compassion, we can guide them toward healthier patterns of living and learning.

Reporting child abuse and neglect

Children rely on adults to report suspected abuse. Child victims may be afraid to tell someone they are being abused. Many children mistakenly believe they deserve the abuse. If a child tells you about abuse, pay attention.

Child abuse is against the law. Every state has mandatory reporting laws. The earlier you identify a problem, the better. ***If you know of or suspect child abuse or neglect, you have a social and legal responsibility to report it to your local child protection agency.*** Phone numbers are listed on the back of this sheet. Remember that a person who in good faith reports a suspected case of child abuse has legal immunity from liability. The source of child abuse information is kept confidential, if at all possible.

If you report suspected abuse, you do not need to prove that it occurred. A report is a request for an investigation. Child protection workers are trained to assess family situations, identify problems, and ensure children's safety.

Indicators of child abuse and neglect

There are various characteristics that suggest child abuse and neglect. While these signs may indicate other problems, they can help you determine if abuse or neglect is occurring.

Child-related signs of possible abuse or neglect:

- Suspicious burns, bruises, injuries
- Often tired, hungry, or not clean
- Needs glasses or dental/medical care
- Extreme aggression and/or passivity
- Lags in development
- Afraid of parents or adults
- Unpleasant, demanding
- Often does not obey
- Mood swings
- Unusually shy, avoids other children and adults
- Avoids physical contact
- Apt to seek affection from any adult
- Reports being hurt or abused
- Unusual sexual awareness or behavior

Parent or caregiver signs of possible abuse:

- Misuses alcohol or other drugs
- Disorganized, upset home life
- Does not seem to care what happens
- Isolated, doesn't seem to get along with others
- Uses inappropriate, harsh discipline
- Seems unconcerned about child
- Sees child as very bad or evil
- Gives questionable explanation of child's injury

The best approach: prevention

The effects of child abuse and neglect are far-reaching and long-lasting. Children suffer emotional and physical damage from abuse throughout their lives. Some children die. About 20 percent of those abused grow up to become abusive adults. Society pays the price in violence, legal fees, lost creativity, and social service programs.

Prevention programs work and cost far less than the social and economic price we pay once abuse occurs. Successful programs include:

- Prenatal support and education
- Parent education
- Accessible, quality childcare
- Early health care and developmental screening
- Stress management and impulse control
- Self-help groups, parent support groups
- Home health visitors and foster grandparents
- Church, neighborhood, and community programs

What you can do

There are many ways to become actively involved in the prevention of child abuse.

1. Take a look at yourself. If you are a parent or a child caregiver, reach out for help if you feel overwhelmed. Educate yourself about parenthood. It's one of the most important roles you will ever play.

2. Look around you. Learn the indicators of abuse and neglect. Be aware of what is going on around you. Report abuse if you suspect it. If a friend needs help with the stress of parenting, reach out.
3. Nurture and encourage children. Express your love and appreciation. Don't be too busy to give the special children in your life a hug and a smile. A few words of encouragement and some moments of undivided attention make a big difference.
4. Get involved. Start a parent support group in your neighborhood. Request speakers on parenting for school or church meetings. Volunteer your time or contribute financially. Support your friends and family members. Prevention begins right in your own home and neighborhood.

Resources

Parents Anonymous (PA) is a self-help program designed to help parents prevent damaging relationships between themselves and their children. It is the largest national child abuse prevention and treatment program. PA offers a variety of resources. To find out about PA in your state, call the national office in Los Angeles, CA, 1-800-421-0353.

To report child abuse

In Iowa call1-800-362-2178

In the Des Moines area call1-800-652-9516

Adapted for use in Iowa by Lesia Oesterreich, Extension Human Development and Family Studies Specialist, and Karen Shirer, Extension Assistant Director to Families, from materials prepared for the University of Kentucky Extension Service by Lisa Carpenter Smith, former Educational Programs Director, Lexington Child Abuse Council; Sheila Brown, UK Graduate Student; and Sam Quick, Human Development and Family Relations Specialist. (1991, FSES-S)

A Project of Iowa State University Extension

May be reproduced for nonprofit purposes.

File: Family Life 3

... and justice for all

The Iowa Cooperative Extension Service's programs are consistent with pertinent federal and state laws and regulations on nondiscrimination regarding race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age and disability.

Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, and the United States Department of Agriculture cooperating. Robert M. Anderson Jr., director, Ames, Iowa. Distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914.