Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms of Child Abuse and Neglect
What is Child Abuse and Neglect?

Federal Definition:

• Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm.”
State Definitions

State Statute Search

https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/index.cfm?event=stateStatutes.showSearchForm
Major Types of Abuse and Neglect

- Physical
- Sexual
- Neglect
- Emotional
- Abandonment
Physical

• Nonaccidental physical injury (ranging from minor bruises to severe fractures or death) as a result of punching, beating, kicking, biting, shaking, throwing, stabbing, choking, hitting (with a hand, stick, strap, or other object), burning, or otherwise harming a child, that is inflicted by a parent, caregiver, or other person who has responsibility for the child.
Physical

• Such injury is considered abuse regardless of whether the caregiver intended to hurt the child. Physical discipline, such as spanking or paddling, is not considered abuse as long as it is reasonable and causes no bodily injury to the child.
Neglect

- Neglect is the failure of a parent, guardian, or other caregiver to provide for a child’s basic needs. Neglect may be:
  - Physical (e.g., failure to provide necessary food or shelter, or lack of appropriate supervision)
  - Medical (e.g., failure to provide necessary medical or mental health treatment)
  - Educational (e.g., failure to educate a child or attend to special education needs)
  - Emotional (e.g., inattention to a child’s emotional needs, failure to provide psychological care, or permitting the child to use alcohol or other drugs)
Sexual Abuse

- Sexual abuse is defined by Child Abuse Prevention Treatment Act (CAPTA) as “the employment, use, persuasion, inducement, enticement, or coercion of any child to engage in, or assist any other person to engage in, any sexually explicit conduct or simulation of such conduct for the purpose of producing a visual depiction of such conduct; or the rape, and in cases of caretaker or inter-familial relationships, statutory rape, molestation, prostitution, or other form of sexual exploitation of children, or incest with children.”
Sexual Abuse

• Sexual abuse includes activities by a parent or caregiver such as:
  – Fondling a child’s genitals
  – Penetration
  – Incest
  – Rape
  – Sodomy
  – Indecent exposure, and
  – Exploitation through prostitution or the production of pornographic materials.
Emotional Abuse or Psychological Abuse

- A pattern of behavior that impairs a child’s emotional development or sense of self-worth.

- This may include:
  - Constant criticism
  - Threats
  - Rejection
  - Withholding love, support, or guidance
Emotional Abuse or Psychological Abuse

• Emotional abuse is often difficult to prove, and therefore, child protective services may not be able to intervene without evidence of harm or mental injury to the child.

• Emotional abuse is almost always present when other types of maltreatment are identified.
Abandonment

- Defined in many States as a form of neglect. In general, a child is considered to be abandoned when the parent’s identity or whereabouts are unknown, the child has been left alone in circumstances where the child suffers serious harm, or the parent has failed to maintain contact with the child or provide reasonable support for a specified period of time.
Substance Abuse

• An element of the definition of child abuse or neglect in many States. Circumstances that are considered abuse or neglect in some States include the following:
  – Prenatal exposure of a child to harm due to the mother’s use of an illegal drug or other substance
  – Manufacture of methamphetamine in the presence of a child
  – Selling, distributing, or giving illegal drugs or alcohol to a child
  – Use of a controlled substance by a caregiver that impairs the caregiver’s ability to adequately care for the child
Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms
Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms

The Child:

- Shows sudden changes in behavior or school performance
- Has not received help for physical or medical problems brought to the parents’ attention
- Has learning problems (or difficulty concentrating) that cannot be attributed to specific physical or psychological causes
- Is always watchful, as though preparing for something bad to happen
Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms

The Child:

• Lacks adult supervision.
• Is overly compliant, passive, or withdrawn.
• Comes to school or other activities early, stays late, and does not want to go home.
• Is reluctant to be around a particular person.
• Discloses maltreatment.
Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms

The Parent:

- Denies the existence of—or blames the child for—the child’s problems in school or at home.
- Asks teachers or other caregivers to use harsh physical discipline if the child misbehaves.
- Sees the child as entirely bad, worthless, or burdensome.
- Demands a level of physical or academic performance the child cannot achieve.
- Looks primarily to the child for care, attention, and satisfaction of the parent’s emotional needs.
- Shows little concern for the child.
The Parent and Child Relationship

- Rarely touch or look at each other
- Consider their relationship entirely negative
- State that they do not like each other
Signs of Physical Abuse

The Child:

• Has unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, or black eyes.
• Has fading bruises or other marks noticeable after an absence from school.
• Seeks frightened of the parents and protests or cries when it is time to go home.
• Shrinks at the approach of adults.
• Reports injury by a parent or another adult caregiver.
• Abuses animals or pets.
The Parent or Adult Caregiver

- Offers conflicting, unconvincing, or no explanation for the child’s injury, or provides an explanation that is not consistent with the injury.
- Describes the child as “evil” or in some other very negative way.
- Uses harsh physical discipline with the child.
- Has a history of abuse as a child.
- Has a history of abusing animals or pets.
Signs of Neglect

The child:

- Is frequently absent from school
- Begs or steals food or money
- Lacks needed medical or dental care, immunizations, or glasses
- Is consistently dirty and has severe body odor
- Lacks sufficient clothing for the weather
- Abuses alcohol or other drugs
- States that there is no one at home to provide care
The Parent or Adult Caregiver

• Appears to be indifferent to the child
• Seems apathetic or depressed
• Behaves irrationally or in a bizarre manner
• Is abusing alcohol or other drugs
Signs of Sexual Abuse

The Child:

• Has difficulty walking or sitting.
• Suddenly refuses to change for gym or to participate in physical activities.
• Reports nightmares or bedwetting.
• Experiences a sudden change in appetite.
• Demonstrates bizarre, sophisticated, or unusual sexual knowledge or behavior.
Signs of Sexual Abuse

The Child:

• Becomes pregnant or contracts a sexually transmitted disease, particularly if under age 14
• Runs away
• Reports sexual abuse by a parent or another adult caregiver
• Attaches very quickly to strangers or new adults in their environment
The Parent or Adult Caregiver

- Is unduly protective of the child or severely limits the child’s contact with other children, especially of the opposite sex
- Is secretive and isolated
- Is jealous or controlling with family members
Signs of Emotional Maltreatment

The child:

- Shows extremes in behavior, such as overly compliant or demanding behavior, extreme passivity, or aggression.
- Is either inappropriately adult (parenting other children, for example) or inappropriately infantile (frequently rocking or head-banging, for example).
- Is delayed in physical or emotional development.
- Has attempted suicide.
- Reports a lack of attachment to the parent.
The Parent or Adult Caregiver

• Constantly blames, belittles, or berates the child
• Is unconcerned about the child and refuses to consider offers of help for the child’s problems
• Overtly rejects the child
What Can Educators Do?

• **Support families and help prevent child abuse and neglect.** Merely being a supportive adult in a child’s life can enhance the child’s resiliency.

• Educators also can help guide parents in times of crisis, teach and model positive discipline practices, and **refer children and families for additional services and supports**, if needed, which may prevent referrals to out-of-home care.
What Can Educators Do?

- Identify possible abuse and neglect. Educators also should be aware of the types of child maltreatment, including neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse; their possible physical, emotional, and behavioral signs; and State definitions about what constitutes child maltreatment.
What Can Educators Do?

• **Report suspected child abuse and neglect.** Educators should be knowledgeable about the child maltreatment reporting protocols for their particular schools and localities.
What Can Educators Do?

• Be a resource for child welfare agencies. Child welfare workers frequently consult with school personnel when assessing a family, developing a case plan, and determining where the child should live.

• Educators may have information (either in records or through personal knowledge) about the child’s or family’s strengths and challenges.
What Can Educators Do?

• **Be a resource for children involved with child welfare.** Children involved in a child protective services (CPS) investigation or living in out-of-home care (e.g., with relatives or a foster family) need the stability of normal experiences such as attending school and being involved in extracurricular activities. Children who have changed schools a number of times may need extra help in making up schoolwork, earning credits, or filling in gaps in their learning.
What Can Educators Do?

• Support and encourage the child to participate in extracurricular activities such as sports, music, drama, and clubs, which can have a positive effect on their attendance, academic work, behavior, and ability to make friends.
What Can Educators Do?

• Learning more about policies and services applicable to children involved with child welfare, such as eligibility for services, scholarship and financial aid opportunities, and confidentiality issues.

• Recognize the effects of trauma and utilize trauma-informed practices.
Resources
2014 Prevention Resource Guide

What’s Inside

- How to Promote Protective Factors and Well-Being
- How to Engage the Community Partners
- Tip Sheets for Parents and Caregivers
- Activity Calendars
Questions/ Comments
CONTACT INFORMATION

Rosie Gomez
Child Welfare Program Specialist
Office on Child Abuse and Neglect
Administration for Children and Families, ACYF, CB
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
(202) 205-7403
Rosie.Gomez@acf.hhs.gov

Sharon McKinley
Program Manager
Prevention and Child Protection
Child Welfare Information Gateway
(703) 225-2173
smckinley@childwelfare.gov