

Possible indicators of abuse

Most child abuse or neglect is not identified based on a single event or indicator. Indicators usually occur in clusters and, in some cases, there may be no indicators of abuse occurring. The following indicators may lead to a concern that a child is being subjected to abuse. Indicators should be considered in the context of the child's age, capabilities, medical and developmental history.

Type of abuse	Definition	Possible physical indicators	Possible behavioural indicators
Physical abuse	<p>Physical abuse occurs when a child is severely and/or persistently hurt or injured by an adult or a child's caregiver. It may also be the result of putting a child at risk of being injured.</p> <p>Some examples are: hitting, shaking, punching; burning and scolding; excessive physical punishment or discipline; attempted suffocation; giving harmful substances.</p> <p>It does not include accidental injury.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bite marks • Bruises • Burns • Broken bones • Hair missing in tufts • Arms and legs covered by clothing in warm weather • Lacerations and abrasions (especially to the eyes, lips, gums and mouth) • Missing or loosened teeth • Welts • Female genital mutilation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overly compliant, shy, withdrawn, passive • Uncommunicative • Regressive behaviour • Fear of parent/carer or relative • Avoidance of physical contact • Unexplained or unlikely explanation of injury • Little or no emotion when hurt • Disclosure directly or indirectly through drawings, play or writing • Drug or alcohol abuse • Non-suicidal self-injury • Suicidal ideation • Attempted suicide • School attendance issues
Emotional abuse	<p>Emotional abuse occurs when an adult harms a child's development by repeatedly treating and speaking to a child in ways that damage the child's ability to feel and express their feelings.</p> <p>Emotional abuse includes psychological abuse and exposure to family violence.</p> <p>Some examples are: constantly criticising, shaming or threatening a child or showing little or no love, support or guidance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eating disorder • Lethargy or fatigue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessively compliant or passive • Excessively shy or withdrawn • Excessively neat or clean • Wetting, soiling, smearing • Low self-esteem • Poor peer relationships • Aggressive or delinquent behaviour • Reluctance to go home • Lack of trust • Highly anxious • Fearful when approached by an unknown person • Disclosure directly or indirectly through drawings, play or writing • Drug or alcohol abuse • Non-suicidal self-injury • Suicidal ideation • Attempted suicide • School attendance issues

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<p>Family violence</p>	<p>Family violence is a reference to: (a) violence, or a threat of violence, by a person towards a family member of the person; or (b) any other behaviour by the person that coerces or controls the family member or causes the member to be fearful.</p> <p>A child is exposed to family violence or personal violence if the child sees or hears the violence or otherwise experiences the effects of the violence.</p> <p>Examples of exposure to family violence include: overhearing threats of death or personal injury to a person; or seeing or hearing an assault of a person; or comforting or providing assistance to a person who has been assaulted; or cleaning up a site after property damage; or being present when police or ambulance officers attend an incident involving the violence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Injuries which are excused as 'accidents' • Easily startled • Lethargy • Wetting, soiling, smearing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in personal behaviours, e.g. an outgoing student becomes withdrawn • Concentration difficulties • Highly anxious • Constant and/or abrupt withdrawal from activities and events • A fear of the parent or caregiver • An extreme fear of conflict • Tendencies towards isolation and avoidance of friends and family • Sudden anger or violent outbursts • Hyper-vigilance • Disclosure directly or indirectly through drawings, play or writing • Drug or alcohol abuse • Non-suicidal self-injury • Suicidal ideation • Attempted suicide • School attendance issues

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<p>Neglect</p>	<p><u>Omission of care</u> Neglect is when a child is not provided with adequate food or shelter, effective medical, therapeutic or remedial treatment, and/or care, nurturance or supervision to a severe and/or persistent extent where the health or development of the child is significantly impaired or placed at serious risk.</p> <p><u>Cumulative harm</u> The term 'cumulative harm' refers to the effects of patterns of circumstances and events in a child's life. The unremitting daily impact of these experiences on the child can be profound and exponential, and diminish a child's sense of safety, stability and wellbeing. Cumulative harm may be caused by an accumulation of a single recurring adverse circumstance or event, or by multiple circumstances or events.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor hygiene • Dirty and unwashed • Lack of adequate or suitable clothing • Lack of medical or dental care • Development delays • Untreated physical or medical problems, e.g. sores, boils or lice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always attends program/events, even when sick • Frequent lateness or absence, early arrival and/or reluctance to leave • Falling asleep, constant fatigue • Dull, apathetic demeanour • Dishevelled appearance • Steals, hoards or begs for food • Consistently hungry • Engages in vandalism • Frequent illness, minor infections or sores • Disclosure directly or indirectly through drawings, play or writing • Drug or alcohol abuse • Non-suicidal self-injury • Suicidal ideation • Attempted suicide • School attendance issues

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Sexual abuse	<p>Sexual abuse, in relation to a child, includes sexual behaviour in circumstances where</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the child is the subject of bribery, coercion, a threat, exploitation or violence; or the child has less power than another person involved in the behaviour; or there is a significant disparity in the developmental function or maturity of the child and another person involved in the behaviour. <p>Some examples are: inappropriate or unwanted touching, exposure to sexual acts or pornographic materials and sexual assault.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bruises or bleeding from vaginal or anal regions Blood stained clothing Pregnancy Signs of pain, itching or discomfort in the anal or genital area Urinary tract infections Wetting, soiling, smearing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sexual behaviour or knowledge of sexual matters inappropriate to age or development Sexual behaviour that is harmful to self or others Disclosure of involvement in sexual activity directly to an adult, indirectly to a friend or in a disguised way, e.g. "I know a person who..." Decline in school performance Poor attention or refusal to be involved in activities Regression to infantile behaviour, e.g. thumb-sucking, rocking Unexplained fears Anxiety Sadness Running away from home Resistance to having contact with or fear of a parent/carer/relative Eating disorder Volatile substance use Criminal sexual behaviour Anger and defiance Deliberate cruelty to animals Helplessness Aggression Social withdrawal or isolation Disclosure directly or indirectly through drawings, play or writing Drug or alcohol abuse Non-suicidal self-injury Suicidal ideation Attempted suicide School attendance issues

References

Briggs, F. (2012) *Child Protection, The essential guide for teachers and other professionals who work with children*
www.dcp.wa.gov.au/ChildProtection/ChildAbuseAndNeglect/Pages/Childabuseandneglect.aspx

This information was sourced from the Department of Education, Western Australia.
www.education.wa.edu.au/childprotection