

Recognizing Signs of Abuse and Neglect in Early Childhood



The Truth About Childhood Abuse and Neglect

According to the Administration for Children and Families (2023):

42 per 1,000

Children received a child protective services investigation or alternative response.

7-8 per 1,000

Children were confirmed victims of abuse or neglect (7.9 girls, 6.9 boys).

About 2,000

Children died from abuse or neglect.

21 per 1,000

Victims were under 1 year old, across all backgrounds.

What is Child Abuse and Neglect?

Child abuse is harm caused by an adult that threatens a child's health and well-being including traumatic brain injury when babies are violently shaken. Child neglect is the failure to provide proper care or meet a child's needs, including:

Physical needs (food, shelter)

Supervision and safety

Medical care

Educational needs

Abandonment

Sexual abuse includes molestation, exploitation, and exposure to sexual activity. Emotional neglect or abuse involves repeated patterns of verbal abuse, harsh punishments, and putdowns that harm children's mental or psychological ability to develop or function.

Why Are Young Children at Higher Risk?

Young children are especially vulnerable because they rely entirely on adults for survival, safety, and development. They cannot protect themselves or ask for help.

Parenting in the early years can be overwhelming, and some families need extra support to meet children's needs. Stress increases when basic needs like housing, food, or utilities are hard to meet, or when parents face mental health, substance use, or domestic violence challenges without adequate help.

These pressures do not mean parents don't care. Without support and resources, stress compounds and parenting becomes harder. Access to support can reduce stress and help prevent abuse and neglect.

How Can We Protect Children and Help Them Thrive?

Research shows that safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments are powerful protective factors. When families have access to services and support, they are better able to provide responsive caregiving—and when stress decreases, children are more likely to thrive even in the face of adversity.

Resource parents (foster parents or extended family caregivers) play a vital role by:

- Building strong, healthy attachments
- Supporting children's emotional needs
- Working with parents and child welfare professionals
- Helping create safety, stability, and permanency for children

Recognizing Signs of Child Abuse, Neglect, and Stress:

Possible physical and behavioral signs include:

- Poor nutrition, malnourishment, or eating concerns (hoarding food, stuffing, extreme pickiness)
- Low energy or lethargy
- Unexplained bruises, injuries, or poor hygiene
- Developmental or dental delays
- Sexual behaviors unusual for age, or self-harming behaviors
- Flinching, fearfulness, or withdrawal

Signs of a traumatic stress response can include:

- Sleep problems, including nightmares
- Distress from noises, touch, smells, tastes, or busy environments
- Feeling sick or experiencing flare-ups of health problems (such as asthma)
- Frequent tantrums or difficulty managing strong emotions
- High activity levels, trouble paying attention, or listening
- Reluctance to play, try new things, or engage socially
- Believing they are bad or to blame for what happened

How to Seek Help



Talk to your providers about parenting resources, support, and trauma treatments to help the whole family heal. Talking about child abuse and neglect is sensitive; your providers will listen and guide you through the steps to get the help and needed to keep children safe and healthy.

Effective therapies exist for both children and caregivers. Look for therapists trained in:

- **Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-Up (ABC):** Helps parents strengthen their bond with infants and young children while supporting healthy emotional development.
- **Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP):** Helps young children and caregivers heal together after trauma, stress, or difficult life experiences.
- **Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT):** Coaches parents to strengthen their relationship with their child while improving behavior and communication.
- **Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT):** Helps children and caregivers process trauma, build coping skills, and support emotional healing.

Parent programs can also help caregivers, resource parents, and teachers support young children experiencing traumatic stress:

- Circle of Security
- Strong Roots / Mom Power
- Attachment Vitamins
- Resource Parent Curriculum (NCTSN)



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Healthy New Families is a program of the Mental Health Association of Maryland. We promote mental health and well-being for new parents, infants and young children, and families across Maryland by connecting families and providers with resources, education, and support.

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For more resources, visit
mhamd.org/earlychildhood