

# Unit 9: Child Abuse and Neglect

## What Is Child Abuse and Neglect?

There are four main types of child maltreatment: physical abuse, child neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. Although any form of child maltreatment may be found separately, they often occur in combination. Emotional abuse is almost always present when other forms are identified.

**Physical abuse** is causing physical injury or otherwise harming a child. The parent or caretaker may not have intended to hurt the child; the injury may have resulted instead from excessive discipline or physical punishment.

**Child neglect** is failure to provide for a child's basic needs. Neglect can be divided into three types: Physical neglect, educational neglect, and emotional neglect.

**Sexual abuse** includes fondling a child's genitals, intercourse, incest, rape, sodomy, exhibitionism, and commercial exploitation through prostitution or the production of pornographic materials. Many experts believe that child sexual abuse is the most underreported form of child maltreatment.

**Emotional abuse** (psychological, verbal, or mental) includes acts or omissions by parents or caregivers that have caused, or could cause, the symptoms listed below.

Significant stresses in the lives of parents or caretakers may increase the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. Problems may include social stressors (unemployment, poverty, divorce, death), health crises (family illness, alcohol and other drug abuse in the family), and mental health problems.

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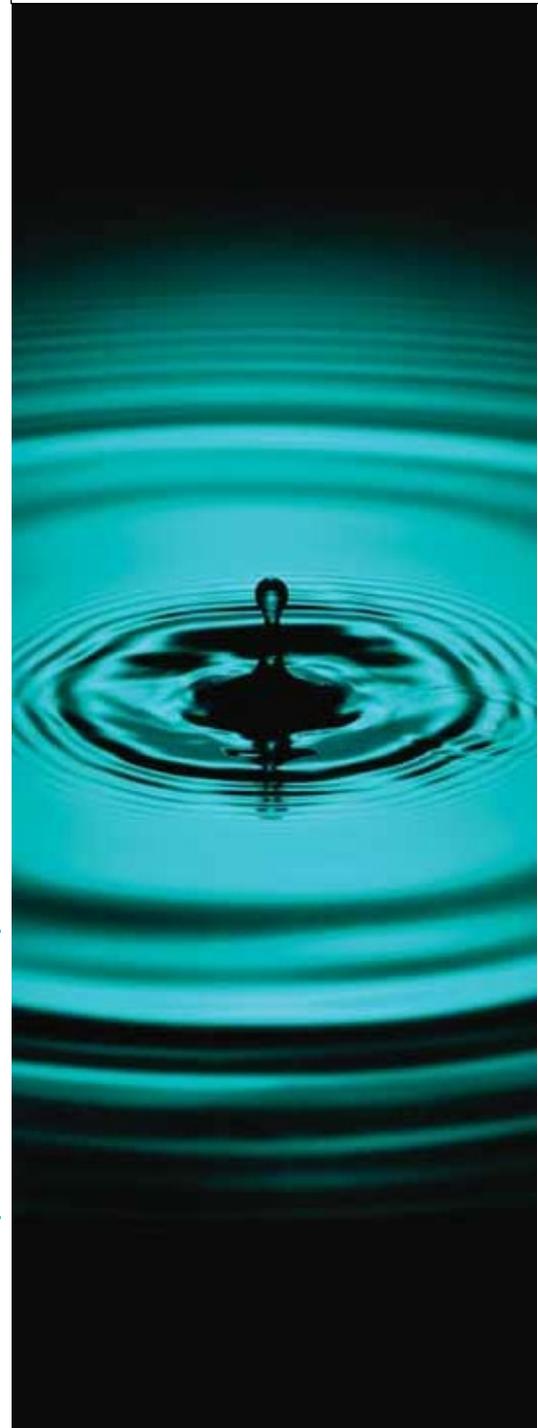
*I did, but I didn't want to tell. I wanted to, but I didn't want to. . . I was thinking, if I told and he found out, I would be in trouble.*

—Sam, 8

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## Words To Know

- Abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Exploitation
- Neglect
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse



In some cases, the acts alone, without any harm evident in the child's behavior or condition, can warrant intervention by child protective services (e.g., practices such as confining a child to a dark closet or a cage). Children who have been abused and/or neglected are harmed physically, behaviorally, and emotionally. For example—

- A neglected child may look undernourished and/or may have sleep disorders or untreated injuries. He or she may beg or steal food, have poor hygiene, or be involved in promiscuity, drugs, or delinquency. As a result, the child may have poor self-esteem, emotional issues, or social problems.
- A physically abused child may have questionable injuries such as bruises, welts, burns, fractures, cuts, or scrapes. As a consequence of the abuse, the child may be uncomfortable with physical contact, frightened of parents or other adults, afraid to go home, or act aggressively or withdrawn.
- Most physical indicators of child sexual abuse are identified through a doctor's examination. Behavior that may signal child sexual abuse includes inappropriate knowledge of sex, highly sexualized play, unexplained fear of a specific person or place, nightmares, or withdrawal. A sexually abused child may have low self-confidence, feel shame or guilt, or appear depressed or anxious.
- Behaviors that indicate emotional abuse include conduct disorders, extreme behaviors, cruelty, and delinquency. Often, an emotionally abused child will experience delays in development.

The consequences of child abuse and neglect can be serious and long term. Abused and neglected children may experience a lifelong pattern of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, inappropriate or troubled relationships, or a lack of empathy.





## In the News: Child Abuse and Neglect Trends

Reports of child abuse and neglect have quadrupled since the 1980s. Court schedules and social work caseloads are filled with instances of this crime. Take a look at the facts below. Which of these trends doesn't surprise you?

- Child abuse is reported, on average, every 10 seconds.
- Nearly one-half of substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect are associated with parental alcohol or drug use.
- Girls are sexually abused more often than boys.
- Boys have a greater risk of emotional neglect and serious injuries than girls.
- Children of single parents are at a higher risk of physical abuse and neglect.
- Some studies have shown that neglect may be even more detrimental to a child's early brain development than physical or sexual abuse.<sup>14</sup>
- An average of four children die every day from abuse or neglect in the United States.<sup>15</sup>
- Children ages 4 and younger are the most frequent victims of child fatalities.<sup>16</sup>
- Fathers and mothers' boyfriends are most often the perpetrators in abuse deaths; mothers are more often at fault in neglect fatalities.<sup>17</sup>

## Examples of Child Abuse and Neglect

As you read each example of child abuse and neglect crimes, consider the impact on victims.

### Neglect

*Failure to provide for a child's basic needs.*

Maria's teachers notice that she looks undernourished and is usually hungry when she arrives at school. She has been found sleeping in class and stealing food from the other children's lunch boxes.

What may Maria think and feel because she is neglected?

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*... frightened, very frightened  
... trust me, it's very, very scary.*

—Tom, 11

### Physical Abuse

*Causing physical injury.*

A soccer coach notices that Eric is having trouble walking and running. When the coach asks Eric what's wrong, he says that he accidentally fell down. The coach looks closer and sees strap-shaped welts and bruises on Eric's legs in various stages of healing.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/earlybrain.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2015). Child abuse and neglect fatalities 2013: Statistics and interventions. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

How do you feel about what happened to Eric?

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**Sexual Abuse**

*Sexually abusing or exploiting an underage child.*

Jimmy’s first-grade classmates have complained to the teacher that he showed them his “privates” and tried to pull down their pants when they refused to show him their “privates.”

What do you think has happened to Jimmy? Would you want your child in a classroom with Jimmy?

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**Emotional Abuse**

*Psychological, verbal, or mental abuse.*

Mark is usually a pretty happy 6-year-old. Lately his babysitter has noticed that he appears withdrawn and is very bossy with the other children. One day, Mark grabbed another child, yelled at him, and shoved him to the floor. Mark asked the babysitter not to call his mother because Joe, his mother’s new boyfriend, would get angry and hurt his mother.

What might be happening in Mark’s life?

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*It just creeps into every  
part of your life.*

**—Belinda, 16**

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## What Is the Impact of Child Abuse and Neglect?

The table on the next page outlines the initial and long-term mental health effects of just one form of child maltreatment: sexual abuse.

**Mental Health Effects of Child Sexual Abuse**

<p><b>Initial Effects</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Anxiety</li> <li>• Low self-esteem</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Anger and hostility</li> <li>• Sexual behavior problems</li> <li>• Aggressive or delinquent behavior</li> <li>• Substance use/abuse/dependency</li> <li>• Impaired social functioning</li> </ul>	<p><b>Long-Term Effects</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sexual disorders</li> <li>• Posttraumatic stress disorder</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Suicidal ideation and attempts</li> <li>• Anxiety disorders</li> <li>• Substance use/abuse/dependency</li> <li>• Physical complaints</li> <li>• Personality disorders</li> <li>• Low self-esteem</li> <li>• Impaired social relationships</li> <li>• Increased vulnerability to other victimizations and traumatic experiences</li> </ul>
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Source: Dr. Ben Saunders, National Crime Victims’ Research and Treatment Center, Medical University of South Carolina.

The following lists outline some examples of how any type of child abuse or neglect can affect the financial, physical, emotional, and religious/spiritual areas of victims’ lives. Add your own examples below.

<p><b>Financial</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing medical bills</li> <li>• Medication</li> <li>• Legal fees</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> </ul>	<p><b>Physical</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor physical health</li> <li>• Poor mental and emotional health</li> <li>• Cognitive difficulties</li> <li>• Social difficulties</li> <li>• Self-injury</li> <li>• Suicide</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> </ul>
<p><b>Emotional</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Juvenile delinquency</li> <li>• Adult criminality</li> <li>• Alcohol and other drug abuse</li> <li>• Abusive behavior toward others</li> <li>• Poor self-image</li> <li>• Sexually acting out</li> <li>• Inability to trust</li> <li>• Aggressive and disruptive behavior</li> <li>• _____</li> </ul>	<p><b>Religious/Spiritual</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alienation from religion or “higher power”</li> <li>• Mistrust in faith leaders, faith institutions, or “higher power”</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> </ul>



## Victim Impact: Listen and Learn

After viewing the OVC *Victim Impact: Listen and Learn* DVD clip about child abuse and neglect, answer the following questions:

What was the emotional impact of the abuse on Nia?

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What was the physical impact?

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How was her mother affected?

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## Being Accountable for Your Crimes

**No one has the right to abuse or neglect a child.** A person who commits a violent or neglectful act against a child must recognize the devastating and often lifelong impact that his or her criminal actions will have.

Offenders can admit wrongdoing; accept personal responsibility; pay restitution to help cover costs related to counseling and medical expenses; and, if desired by the victim’s family, apologize for the harm that they caused.



# Additional Activities

## Activity B – Nia

Answer the following questions after watching Nia talk about being sexually abused as a child.

At what age was Nia sexually abused?

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When did she first tell someone about the abuse?

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Who abused her?

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Was Nia threatened during the abuse?

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Nia says that she wishes she had told sooner, but she says, "I just couldn't." What do you think she means by that?

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## Activity C – “Drugs Don’t Hurt” Role Play

### Drug Dealer

Brenda, age 17, is a regular customer of yours. Today she approaches you with her 3-year-old child in tow. The child is crying and carrying an empty water bottle. Brenda has no money and she attempts to get you to “loan” her some drugs. You refuse.

Later she comes back with money and you sell her what she wants. You notice that she is pregnant, but you are more concerned about her young child seeing the drug exchange.

### Brenda

You are 17 years old, the mother of a 3-year-old, and in the early stages of pregnancy. You are broke, your child is hungry, and you need drugs. You take your child with you while you try to find your dealer. You attempt to get the dealer to “loan” you drugs until you can get some money. You plead but he refuses.

You walk down the street with your child and solicit for sex. You get paid and return to the dealer. He will only sell to you when you leave your child out of sight.

### “John”

You are in the neighborhood looking for a prostitute. Brenda approaches you with her child. You object to the child being present and tell her to do something with the child first. You notice that she is pregnant but you don’t care. You pay her for sex.

### Child

You toddle around begging your mother, holding your empty water bottle, crying, and whimpering. You say that you are hungry and you are scared. When your mom leaves you somewhere to prostitute herself, you cry.

### Activity D – The Letter

Read the letter below. Then describe your thoughts, feelings, and reactions to this letter as if it had been sent to you.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_, [Your Name]

I know I usually write you with good news so that I don't add to any of your troubles—being locked up is enough trouble. I know it's hard being away from your family. I don't feel right telling you in a letter, but I thought you should know. Your little girl got hurt and has a cast on her arm. I heard that your ex is hanging around someone who drinks too much and doesn't like kids.

I don't think what happened to your little girl was an accident. Let me know if you want me to do anything. Take care,

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[Write in your family member's/friend's name]

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