

# Child Abuse and Neglect:

19

## the Emotional Effects

Factsheet for parents and teachers

### What is child abuse?

*All parents upset their children sometimes. Saying 'no' and managing difficult behaviour is an essential part of parenting. Tired or stressed parents can lose control and can do or say something they regret, and may even hurt the child. If this happens often enough, it can seriously harm the child. That is why abuse is defined in law.*

### Significant harm means that someone is:

- punishing a child too much
- hitting or shaking a child
- constantly criticising, threatening or rejecting a child
- sexually interfering with or assaulting a child
- not looking after a child – not giving them enough to eat, ignoring them, not playing or talking with them or not making sure that they are safe.

### Who abuses children?

Children are usually abused by someone in their immediate family circle. This can include parents, brothers or sisters, babysitters or other familiar adults. It is quite unusual for strangers to be involved.

<http://www.trippin.co.nz>

## How can you tell if a child is being abused?

### Physically abused children may be:

- watchful, cautious or wary of adults
- unable to play and be spontaneous
- aggressive or abusive
- bullying other children or being bullied themselves
- unable to concentrate, underachieving at school and avoiding activities that involve removal of clothes, e.g. sports
- having temper tantrums and behaving thoughtlessly
- lying, stealing, truanting from school and getting into trouble with the police
- finding it difficult to trust other people and make friends.

### Sexually abused children may:

- suddenly behave differently when the abuse starts
- think badly of themselves
- not look after themselves
- use sexual talk or ideas in their play that you would usually see only in someone much older
- withdraw into themselves or be secretive
- under-achieve at school
- start wetting or soiling themselves
- be unable to sleep
- behave in an inappropriately seductive or flirtatious way
- be fearful, frightened of physical contact

- become depressed and take an overdose or harm themselves
- run away, become promiscuous or take to prostitution
- drink too much or start using drugs
- develop an eating disorder such as anorexia or bulimia.

### Emotionally abused or neglected children may:

- be slow to learn to walk and talk
- be very passive and unable to be spontaneous
- have feeding problems and grow slowly
- find it hard to develop close relationships
- be over-friendly with strangers
- get on badly with other children of the same age
- be unable to play imaginatively
- think badly of themselves
- be easily distracted and do badly at school.

It can be hard to detect **long-standing abuse** by an adult the child is close to. It is often very difficult for the child to tell anyone about it, as the abuser may have threatened to hurt them if they tell anybody. A child may not say anything because they think it is their fault, that no one will believe them or that they will be teased or punished. The child may even love the abusing adult – they want the abuse to stop, but they don't want the adult to go to prison or for the family to break up.

If you suspect that a child is being abused, you may be able to help them to talk about it. Your local Child Youth & Family Service will be able to offer more detailed advice.

## Where can I get help?

First and foremost, the child must be protected from further abuse. Child Youth & Family Service will need to be involved to find out:

- what has happened
- if it is likely to happen again
- what steps are needed to protect the child.

### Child Protection

After investigation, Child Youth & Family Services may be satisfied that the problems have been sorted out, and that the parents can now care for and protect the child properly. If so, they will remain involved only if the family wants their help. If Child Youth & Family Services are concerned that a child is being harmed, they will arrange a child protection case conference. The parents and professionals who know the child will be invited. A plan will be made to help the child and family and ensure that there is no further harm.

### Help to look after the child

When a child has been abused within the family, the person involved is sometimes able to own up to

what they have done and wants help. They can then be helped to look after their child better. Occasionally, the child may have to be taken away from the abusing adult because the risks of physical and emotional harm are too great. This can be for a short time, until things become safer, or may be permanent.

### Specialist treatment

Many children need specialist treatment because of the abuse they have endured. If they are worried, depressed or being very difficult, the child and family might need help from the local child and adolescent mental health service. These specialists may work with the whole family, or with children and adolescents alone. Sometimes they work with teenagers in groups. Individual therapy can be especially helpful for children who have been sexually abused, or who have experienced severe trauma. Children who have suffered serious abuse or neglect can be difficult to care for, and the service can offer help and advice to parents and carers.

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