

# What Is Child Abuse and Neglect?

Each State provides its own definitions of child abuse and neglect based on minimum standards set by Federal law.

## How Is Child Abuse and Neglect Defined in Federal Law?

Federal legislation lays the groundwork for States by identifying a minimum set of acts or behaviors that define child abuse and neglect. The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), (42 U.S.C.A. §5106g), as amended by the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003, defines child abuse and neglect as, at minimum:

- 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.

Most Federal and State child protection laws primarily refer to cases of harm to a child caused by parents or other caregivers; they generally do not include harm caused by other people, such as acquaintances or strangers.

## What Are the Major Types of Child Abuse and Neglect?

Within the minimum standards set by CAPTA, each State is responsible for providing its own definitions of child abuse and neglect.<sup>1</sup> Most States recognize four major types of maltreatment: physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. Although any of the forms of child maltreatment may be found separately, they often occur in combination. In many States, abandonment and parental substance abuse are also defined as forms of child abuse or neglect.

The examples provided below are for general informational purposes only. Not all States' definitions will include all of the examples listed below, and individual States' definitions may cover additional situations not mentioned here.

**Physical abuse** is 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.<sup>2</sup> 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** 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)<sup>3</sup>
- 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)

These situations do not always mean a child is neglected. Sometimes cultural values, the standards of care in the community, and poverty may be contributing factors, indicating the family is in need of information or assistance. When a family fails to use information and resources, and the child's health or safety is at risk, then child welfare intervention may be required. In addition, many States provide an exception to the definition of neglect for parents who choose not to seek medical care for their children due to religious beliefs that may prohibit medical intervention.<sup>4</sup>

**Emotional abuse** (or psychological abuse) is a pattern of behavior that impairs a child's emotional development or sense of self-worth. This may include constant criticism, threats, or rejection, as well as withholding love, support, or guidance. 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 forms are identified.

**Abandonment** is now 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** is an element of the definition of child abuse or neglect in many States.<sup>5</sup> Circumstances that are considered abuse or neglect in some States include:

- 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

## Resources

*Child Maltreatment 2006*

[www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/child-maltreatment-2006](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/child-maltreatment-2006)

This report summarizes child abuse statistics submitted by States to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) during 2006. It includes information about child maltreatment reports, victims, fatalities, perpetrators, services,

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