

The Child Who Has Been Abused - Vikram Patel

Child abuse is any action that can hurt a child's health or development. There are a number of ways in which children can be hurt.

- *Emotional abuse.* This is the commonest, but least reported, type of abuse. The child is neglected by not being given sufficient food or love and affection or medicines. Sometimes, just one child in the family is abused, while others are treated in a different manner. Verbal abuse by shouting, mocking and calling the child foul things is an example of emotional abuse.
- *Physical abuse.* Many parents use a slap occasionally to discipline their children. However, when the physical punishment is more severe and more frequent, it can cause great damage to a child's emotional health. Some children can also be hit so badly that they suffer broken bones or serious injury.
- *Sexual abuse.* This is the most troubling type of abuse. Here, an adult uses a child for his sexual pleasure. He may touch the child on the sexual organs, make the child touch his sexual organs, or even try to have sexual intercourse with the child.



Why do children get abused?

Both boys and girls can be abused. The commonest person to abuse a child is someone the child knows well, such as the father, brother, uncle, other male relative, family friend, housemaid, babysitter or neighbour. The adult takes advantage of his close relationship and control over the child. Families in which child abuse is taking place are often also families where there are other forms of violence (such as the father being violent towards the mother). Many abusers were abused themselves during their own childhood.

Less often, a child may be abused by a stranger. In some situations, children who are already vulnerable, such as those living on the streets, can be abused and used as sex workers by adults.

This is especially worrying in some parts of the world where tourism and rapid urban growth have led to a breakdown of the community networks that protected children. Most abusers are men. Some are immature, lonely, isolated men and may have a drink or drug problem, but most do not appear odd or behave in an unusual manner.

How are children affected by abuse?

This depends on the type and severity of abuse. For example, the occasional slap by a parent who is otherwise loving and supportive is unlikely to have any harmful effects. On the other hand, repeated physical abuse can lead to severe problems.

- *Physical health.* Injuries such as bruises or cuts, fractures, cigarette burns and, in severe cases, death can occur.
- *Sexual health.* Injuries to the sexual organs, pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases are possible.
- *Mental health.* Abused children often show fear, aggression, poor concentration, depression and antisocial behaviour.
- *School performance.* Abused children may show a drop in their school performance.

When to suspect child abuse

Physical abuse

Suspect physical abuse when a child:

- appears fearful;
- withdraws from other children and does not want to play;
- is aggressive or bullies other children;
- runs away from home or school;
- is lying or stealing;
- performs poorly in school.



Sexual abuse

Suspect sexual abuse when a child:

- is withdrawn and appears sad;
- shows sexualised play or behaviour, such as touching and playing with her sexual parts in public;
- knows more about sex than you would expect;
- starts bed-wetting or soiling after having achieved control;
- performs poorly in school;
- is over-friendly with adults in a manner that was not usual for her;
- attempts suicide;
- is fearful of adults in her family for no clear reason;
- does not trust others;
- starts misusing alcohol or drugs;
- has repeated urine infections, pain while passing urine or other infections or inflammation of the sexual organs.



Emotional abuse

Suspect emotional abuse when a child:

- is not developing or growing properly;
- is losing weight for no obvious medical reason;
- is constantly falling sick;
- has poor language development, that is, not speaking as well as he should;
- is passive and does not react like other children;
- has feeding problems;



- goes back to behaving like a younger child (e.g. when a six-year-old starts behaving like a three-year-old);
- tries to hurt himself;
- runs away from home;
- does not perform well in school;
- appears dull, with little energy; cries very little.

Note that the signs listed above are those that are typically associated with different types of abuse. However, there is overlap. For example, running away from home can be a sign of sexual abuse, while bed-wetting can be a sign of physical abuse.

How to deal with this problem

Questions to ask the family or friends

Few adults will openly report that they feel that a child they know is being abused. It is essential that, if you suspect child abuse, you ask the adult in a frank and open way.

- Do you suspect or know whether this child is being hurt in any way by someone? If there is a possibility, be more specific by asking about all three types of abuse. Do not skip asking about emotional abuse just because it seems less 'serious' than sexual or physical abuse.
- Who do you think is hurting the child? When did it start?
- Has the child been hurt physically? How seriously? What was done for this?
- Has the child been hurt sexually? How seriously? What was done for this?
- Have you shared this information with anyone else? Who?
- Have you told the person (the abuser) that you are concerned about what is going on? If so, what was his reaction?
- Who is the child's guardian? If it is the abuser, then ask who else could take responsibility for the child.

Questions to ask the child

- Sometimes children can get hurt by a grown-up person. Has anyone grown-up hurt you recently?
- If so, who was it? If the child is scared to answer, do not force her. Move on to the next question.
- How did he hurt you? How often?
- How do you feel about this?
- Have you told anyone else? Who? What did they say to you?

Special interview suggestions

- Interviewing children about the possibility of abuse is difficult. Ideally, get an experienced health worker to talk to the



child. If possible, contact a child specialist or other health worker who has worked with abused children.

- Do not ask questions about abuse until you have established rapport with the child. If this means spending more time, then do so. Using toys can help the child relax.
- Speak to the child calmly. Make it clear that the child can ask questions about anything.
- Interview the child with the mother, or with another adult who is definitely not a suspect abuser and whom the child trusts.
- Do not make accusations or threats against anyone. You may frighten the child and make the adults suspicious of your intentions.

Things to look for during the interview

A child who has been abused is likely to be very sensitive to being examined physically. Respect the child's privacy. Explain what you are doing and why. Have a trusted family member present during the examination. Document the findings in detail. These may be needed in a police investigation. A thorough physical examination of the child should include:

- weight and height (to look for signs that the child is not growing properly);
- any injuries on the body;
- any injuries or inflammation of the sexual organs – always examine the anal region as well, especially for boys.

What to do immediately

- Your priority is the health and safety of the child. If you suspect the child's life is in danger, refer him immediately to a place of safety. This could be a family member, a nearby hospital or an organisation working with children.
- Explain to the adults concerned that child abuse is a serious criminal offence and that the abuser is liable for police action if a complaint is made. Carefully write down what was said during the interview. Consider whether informing the police would make the situation worse (for example, if the abuser is the only income earner in the family and he is taken to jail, how will the family survive?). Removing the child to a place of a safety (such as a relative's house) may provide a temporary solution. In some places health workers are required by law to inform the police of cases of child sexual abuse. In such places you must inform the police and let the legal process take its course.
- Talk to the family members who are available. Explain why you suspect abuse. Many parents are not aware that their actions can be so damaging to the child's health. Just telling them about the dangers of beating a child or neglecting her emotional needs may bring about a change in their behaviour. Often, a cycle of violence builds up in the home where parents beat their child, who, in turn, misbehaves even more, leading to more beatings.



Helping the abused child

Help the child feel positive about himself

- Reassure the child that he is not responsible for the abuse.
- Give positive messages to the child about his behaviour and emotions.
- Suggest activities that the child enjoys, such as playing with friends.

Help the child to trust

- Be someone whom the child can talk to in confidence.
- Spend time alone with the child.
- Show love and affection, but remember to be careful about physical touching.

Help the child to identify and express emotions

- Play games that involve naming feelings and emotions.
- Read books that involve emotions.
- Talk about what emotions the child is experiencing and why.
- Teach the child ways of dealing with anger, such as playing with toys until she calms down.

Help the child make a safety plan

- If there is a local police number, write it down somewhere where the child will find it easily.
- Choose a friend or neighbour where the child can go for help.
- Help the child learn to say 'no' to the adult.

Healing messages for children

- I care about you.
- I respect you.
- You are lovable.
- You have strengths.
- It is a good thing you have told me; now we can make sure you will not be hurt again.
- Most adults would never hurt children.
- You can say no if you don't like the way someone touches you.

- If you suspect sexual abuse, then it is unlikely that the family will accept it easily, particularly if the abuser is someone close to the family. Do not accuse anyone. Instead, share your concerns openly with the family and stress that if the abuse continues, the child's health will be even more seriously affected.
- Teach the child how to ensure her safety. Explain that the abuse is not her fault and she should not feel guilty for having spoken out about it. It is important to make sure this never happens again. Suggest the following to the child regarding how she may prevent abuse from recurring:
 - tell the abuser, in a firm manner, not to touch you;
 - run away from the abuser – go to another adult who can protect you.
- Put the family in touch with community supports. This could include child support groups, family violence groups, legal support, child protection agencies, the police or specialist health professionals.



When to refer

If the child abuse persists or is very serious, refer to a child specialist team and be sure to inform the police.

What to do later

Keep in close touch with the child and the family at regular intervals for at least six months. Very often the abuse stops once it has been openly discussed. If it does not, you may need to encourage the family to take action to stop it. Talk to the child each time; many children do recover from the trauma, but some children may develop mental health problems and may need specialist help from trained child health workers or counsellors.

Things to remember when dealing with child abuse

- Child abuse is much commoner than is actually reported by children. This is because most children are too scared or embarrassed to tell an adult.
- The commonest type of abuser is someone whom the child knows – often a father, uncle, brother, domestic help or family friend.
- Boys can be abused as well as girls.
- Abuse can be physical, emotional or sexual. All three types of abuse can damage the physical and mental health of children.
- Most abusers will stop the abuse once they are found out. It is important for you to inform the parents immediately if you suspect abuse.
- Never doubt a child's claims that he is being abused. Take it seriously.

