

YouCan: Identify the signs and symptoms of the four main types of abuse

Definitions taken from [‘Working Together to Safeguard Children \(2026\)’](#)

Physical Abuse	Emotional Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Neglect
A form of abuse which may involve hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning, suffocating or otherwise causing physical harm to a child. Physical harm may also be caused when a parent or carer fabricates the symptoms of, or deliberately induces, illness in a child.	The persistent emotional or psychological maltreatment of a child so as to cause severe and persistent adverse effects on the child’s emotional development. It may involve conveying to a child that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate, or valued only insofar as they meet the needs of another person. It may include not giving the child opportunities to express their views, deliberately silencing them, or making fun of what they say or how they communicate. It may feature age or developmentally inappropriate expectations being imposed on children. These may include interactions that are beyond a child’s developmental capability, as well as overprotection and limitation of exploration and learning, or preventing the child participating in normal social interaction. It may involve seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another. It may involve serious bullying (including cyber bullying), causing children frequently to feel frightened or in danger, or the exploitation or corruption of children. Some level of emotional abuse is involved in all types of maltreatment of a child, though it may occur alone.	Involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts, such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing, and touching outside of clothing. They may also include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse. Sexual abuse can take place in family settings, in institutional settings, online, and technology can be used to facilitate offline abuse. Child sexual abuse material available online may have been generated in a family environment. Online abuse can also take the form of cybergrooming or self-generated sexual content under coercion. Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can also commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children. A child of any age or gender can be a victim of sexual abuse. Sexual exploitation is a form of sexual abuse. Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.	Neglect is the persistent failure to meet a child’s basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child’s health or development. Neglect may occur during pregnancy as a result of maternal substance abuse. Once a child is born, neglect may involve a parent or carer failing to: • provide adequate food, clothing, and shelter (including exclusion from home or abandonment) • protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger • ensure adequate supervision (including the use of inadequate caregivers) • ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment • provide suitable education It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child’s basic emotional needs.

Signs and Symptoms of Abuse

The signs and symptoms in this table are suggestions to help you to identify if a child might be suffering abuse or neglect. Any unusual physical presentation or changes in behaviour should be reported to your Designated Safeguarding Lead immediately.

Physical Abuse	Emotional Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Neglect
Anxious Behavioural issues Being clingy or tearful Bite marks Broken bones, sometimes at different stages of healing Bruised scalp (hair pulling) Bruises Bruises in the shape of an object (as if they have been hit with an object) Burns Burns in the shape of an object (e.g. cigarette burns) Changes in behaviour Defence wounds (forearms, backs of legs, hands and feet) Drug/alcohol misuse Effects of poisoning – drowsiness, vomiting, seizures Flinching when approached Injuries at different stages of healing Marks on unusual body parts (neck, cheeks, inside of arms, ears) Nightmares Not wanting to go home Respiratory problems (from suffocation or drowning) Scarring Truancy Unable to explain injuries/inconsistent explanation Withdrawn	Act in a way that is inappropriate for their age and stage (too young or babyish, or using adult language and behaviours) Aggressive towards other children and animals Behavioural or emotional changes Drug or alcohol misuse Enuresis (bed-wetting) Fearfulness Inappropriate affection/overly-affectionate to new people or strangers Lack confidence Not appear to have a close relationship with their parent/s Poor social skills Seem isolated from their parents, or don't have many (or any) friends Self-esteem issues Self-harm Struggle to control strong emotions or have extreme outbursts Wary or anxious	Anal or vaginal soreness, or injuries in genital/ana area Anxiety Behavioural issues Drug/alcohol abuse Enuresis (bed-wetting) Frightened of a person or reluctant to be alone with someone Going missing from home or care Missing episodes (from home or care) Patterns of absence from school Pregnancy Self-harm Sexualised behaviour Sexually transmitted infections Show sexual behaviour that is inappropriate for their age Truancy or lateness to school Unexplained gifts (e.g. a mobile phone, large sums of money) Unusual discharge Use sexualised language	Anaemia or other signs of malnutrition Failure to thrive Frequent lateness or absence from school Frequent nappy rash in infants Hoarding food Inadequate clothing (poor footwear, no winter coat) Lack of appropriate medication Left alone for long periods of time Missed medical appointments Poor communication skills, language skills and/or social skills Poor muscle tone/prominent joints Recurring illness or infections Seem hungry, overeat at school, often no money for lunch Skin issues such as sores, rashes, flea bites, scabies, ringworm Smelly Stealing food or taking it from rubbish bins Swollen tummy or thin Tiredness Unsuitable home – dirty, cold, dangerous Untreated injuries, illness or dental problems Unwashed clothes Educational neglect Affluent neglect

Useful links

- **NSPCC guidance, types of abuse:** <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/>
- **What to do if you think a child is being abused, HM Government:** <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-to-do-if-youre-worried-a-child-is-being-abused--2>