

# Definitions, signs, and indicators of abuse

Adapted from AISA Child Protection Handbook and World Health Organization

Child protection concerns include suspected, alleged, self-disclosed, or witnessed abuse of a child by anyone which must be investigated and followed by appropriate action. **Child Abuse** constitutes “all forms of physical and emotional ill treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity.”

**A person may abuse a child by inflicting harm, or by failing to act to prevent harm.** Children may be abused in a family or in an institutional or community setting; children may be abused online or in person by individuals known to them, or more rarely, by a stranger. Children may experience multiple forms of abuse simultaneously. Most child abuse is inflicted by someone the child knows, respects or trusts. All adults should understand reasons children may not talk about abuse they might have experienced.

**Signs and indicators may or may not be present and may not indicate abuse.**

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**PHYSICAL ABUSE** may involve hitting (with hand or other item), punching, shaking, throwing, poisoning, biting, kicking, burning or scalding, drowning, suffocating, sustained physical activity or sustained physical restraint, or otherwise causing intentional physical harm to a child.

**Signs of physical abuse that may or may not be present:** — Bruises, burns, sprains, dislocations, bites, cuts — Improbable excuses given to explain injuries — Injuries which have not received medical attention — Injuries that occur to the body in places that are not normally exposed to falls, rough games, etc. — Repeated urinary infections or unexplained stomach pains — Refusal to discuss injuries — Withdrawal from physical contact — Arms and legs kept covered in hot weather — Fear of returning home or of parents being contacted — Showing wariness or distrust of adults — Self-destructive tendencies — Being aggressive towards others — Being very passive and compliant — Chronic running away

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**EMOTIONAL ABUSE** is the persistent emotional ill-treatment of a child so as to cause severe and adverse effects on a child’s emotional development. It may involve: conveying to children that they are worthless or unloved; that they are inadequate or valued only if they meet the needs of another person; age or developmentally inappropriate expectations being imposed on children; causing children frequently to feel frightened; the exploitation or corruption of child’s innocence. **Some level of emotional abuse is involved in all types of ill-treatment of a child, though it may also occur alone.**

**Signs of emotional abuse that may or may not be present:** — Physical, mental and emotional development is delayed — Highly anxious — Showing delayed speech or sudden speech disorder — Fear of new situations — Low self-esteem — Inappropriate emotional responses to painful situations — Extremes of passivity or aggression — Drug or alcohol abuse — Chronic running away — Compulsive stealing — Obsessions or phobias — Sudden under-achievement or lack of concentration — Attention-seeking behavior — Persistent tiredness — Lying

## Definitions, signs, and indicators of abuse cont.

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**SEXUAL ABUSE** involves forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including penetrative or non-penetrative acts such as kissing, rubbing, and touching inside or outside of clothing. They may include non-contact activities, such as voyeurism, involving children in the production or viewing of pornographic material, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or performing sexual acts in their presence. In some countries this includes the grooming of children in preparation for abuse, including on the Internet.

**Signs of sexual abuse that may or may not be present:** — Pain or irritation to the genital area — Discharge from genitals — Difficulty with urination — Infection, bleeding — Sexually Transmitted Diseases — Fear of people or places — Aggression — Regressive behavior, bed wetting, or stranger anxiety — Excessive masturbation/Sexually provocative — Stomach pains or discomfort walking or sitting — Being unusually quiet and withdrawn or unusually aggressive — Sleep disruptions, nightmares — Attention deficits — Suffering from what seem physical ailments that can't be explained medically — Showing fear or distrust of a particular adult — Mentioning receiving special attention from an adult or a new "secret" friendship with an adult or young person — Refusal to continue with school or usual social activities — Age inappropriate sexualized behavior or language

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**NEGLECT** is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical, medical, social, or physiological needs, likely to result in serious impairment of the child's health or development.

**Some indicators of neglect that may or may not be present:** — Medical or dental needs unattended — Lack of supervision — Consistent hunger — Inappropriate dress — Poor hygiene — Inadequate nutrition — Fatigue or listlessness — Self-destructive — Extreme loneliness — Extreme need for affection — Failure to grow — Poor personal hygiene — Frequent lateness or non-attendance at school — Low self-esteem — Poor social relationships — Compulsive stealing — Drug or alcohol abuse — Reluctance to return home

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**LONG-TERM IMPACT OF UNMITIGATED CHILD ABUSE** The impact of child abuse can persist for a lifetime after the abuse has been committed. Impacts are academic, medical, physical, psychological, and emotional. Some victims of abuse are resilient and thus manage to function and survive. Research has established the relationship between long-term child abuse and lifetime negative health and well-being impact, especially if the children do not get appropriate support to help them cope with trauma.

**Long-term impact of child abuse:** — Poor educational achievement — Inability to complete responsibilities — Inability to live according to plan/ability — Inability to care for self — Inability to coexist, cooperate or work with others — Lack of self-confidence, prone to addiction/substance abuse — Inability to express love / or accept love — Inability to lead family, constant health problems — Prone to mental health problems — Low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety — Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) — Attachment difficulties — Eating disorders — Poor peer relations, rage disorders, self-harming behavior (e.g., cutting, suicide attempts)

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**SEXUAL EXPLOITATION** refers to the transactional nature of some forms of abuse. It is a form of sexual abuse where children are sexually exploited for money, power or status. It can involve violent, humiliating, and degrading sexual assaults. In some cases, young people are persuaded or forced into exchanging sexual activity for money, drugs, gifts, affection, or status. Consent cannot be given, even where a child may believe they are voluntarily engaging in sexual activity with the person who is exploiting them. Child sexual exploitation doesn't always involve physical contact and can happen online. A significant number of children who are victims of sexual exploitation go missing from home and education at some point.

**Signs of sexual exploitation that may or may not be present:** — Signs of sexual abuse — Unexplained gifts or new possessions — Associate with other young people involved in exploitation — Have older boyfriends or girlfriends — Suffer from sexually transmitted infections or become pregnant — Suffer from changes in emotional well-being — Fear of people or places — Abuse drugs and alcohol — Go missing for periods of time or regularly come home late — Regularly miss school or education or go missing from education.

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**ONLINE SEXUAL ABUSE & EXPLOITATION** is the sexual abuse of children using digital technology. This commonly includes grooming children with a sexual motive, creating, viewing, and distributing child sexual abuse material (child pornography and self-produced sexual images or 'sexts'), and coercing and blackmailing children for sexual purposes. This abuse may be perpetrated by individuals or gangs, young people, or adults and may include in person contact or only online contact. As technology advances, new forms of this crime emerge. Children with unsupervised use, high usage, low digital knowledge, low self-esteem, poor digital literacy skills (sharing of passwords, insufficient privacy settings, etc.) may be especially vulnerable, but any child with digital access, boys or girls, may be victimized.

**Signs of online grooming, abuse, or exploitation that may or may not be present:** — Secretive behavior — Unexplained gifts or new possessions — Late night or excessive internet use — Anxiety — Withdrawal from family/friends/interests — Suicide ideation/self-harm — Poor educational achievement, attention deficits — Sleep disruption — Increase in followers or contacts — New devices and/or platforms — New usage patterns — Avoidance of online use or certain online platforms or apps.

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### **Additional child protection concerns and forms of abuse:**

Witness to domestic violence (DV)

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Extremism / Radicalization

Trafficking (for sexual or labor purposes)