

# Warning signs of physical abuse

Physical child abuse usually takes place in the shadows of privacy. And because children are usually reluctant to report abuse by a parent or caregiver, it's important to be on the lookout for warning signs that may indicate abuse. Your vigilance could save a child and get help for a family.

Child abuse thrives in secrecy and privacy. It lives on inattention. The only way to stop or prevent it is by identifying the signs and reporting it to the authorities.

But often it's difficult to interpret signs of physical abuse, as these signs may be confused with "normal" childhood injuries, such as bruises, and there are different standards that apply to the term.

It's important, therefore, to understand exactly what constitutes physical abuse and what possible indicators are.

## What is child abuse?

Physical abuse is any physical maltreatment or injury caused by the child's parent or caregiver. It includes injuries sustained from burning, hitting, punching, kicking, shaking, choking, stabbing, drowning, poisoning, biting, scratching, and so on. Physical abuse usually occurs with other forms of child abuse, such as emotional or sexual abuse and neglect.

It isn't necessary for the harm to be intentionally inflicted. More often than not, physical abuse is the unintentional end result of harsh disciplinary methods or corporal punishment that is inappropriate for the child's age and that has escalated to point of physical injury or the risk of physical injury. It may also be the result of recurrent lapses in the parent's self-control brought on by immaturity, stress, or the use of alcohol or illicit drugs.

Research indicates that children requiring special care (such as premature babies or physically or mentally disabled children) or that are "difficult" to raise (such as children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or those with behavioural problems) are more susceptible to being maltreated than others.

## What are the signs of physical abuse?

Of all the forms of child abuse, physical abuse is the most visible. However, because children often sustain bruises or abrasions while playing or being physically active, it's difficult to distinguish these from abuse indicators. Typically, these kinds of injuries would be on the leading or bony edges of the body, such as knees, elbows, forearms, or brows, and are rarely in distinct shapes, such as a hand, belt buckle, fingernail scratches that leave parallel linear marks, or adult teeth marks.

Good indicators of physical abuse are bruises in soft tissue areas, such as cheeks, buttocks, and thighs, as these are not usually injured during play or other physical activity. Other signs include:

- Black eyes
- Bruises and welts in various states of healing, in unusual patterns or clusters which would reflect the instrument or in multiple areas of the body
- Missing, loose or broken teeth
- Human bite marks
- Burns that are in the shape of an iron, grill, or cigarette, or immersion burns that the child could not have inflicted upon himself
- Bald spots on the head
- Broken bones or fractures

Unlike these, abuse directed at the abdomen or head, which are particularly vulnerable areas, usually go undetected, as many of the injuries are internal. Injuries to the abdomen can result in swelling, tenderness, and vomiting. Injuries to the head may cause swelling in the brain, dizziness, blackouts, retinal detachment, or even death. Referred to more recently as the "shaken baby" syndrome, violent shaking can cause severe damage in children at any age.

Children who are being physically abused may also show behavioural signs, depending on their age, developmental level, and level of functioning. Some of these include:

- Changes in the child's behaviour or school performance
- Being aggressive, hyperactive, defiant or destructive
- Being overly compliant with authority
- Cowering or fear of adults
- Frequent crying
- Acting out, displaying aggressive or disruptive behaviour
- Extreme shyness and social withdrawal or being uncommunicative
- Moving or walking awkwardly
- Coming to school too early or not wanting to leave school (indicating a possible fear of going home)
- Fearlessness or extreme risk taking
- Being described as "accident prone"
- Cheating, stealing, or lying (note that this may be related to too high expectations at home)
- Inability to form good peer relationships
- Wearing clothing that covers the body and that may be inappropriate in warmer months (note that this may be a cultural issue as well)
- Showing regressive or less mature behaviour
- Disliking or shying away from physical contact with adults
- Habitual absence from or lateness at school without explanation from parents
- Substance abuse
- Risky sexual behaviours
- Suicide attempts
- Abnormal eating behaviours

The possibility of physical abuse should also be considered if the parent or caregiver:

- Offers conflicting, unconvincing, or no explanation for the child's injury
- Tries to conceal the child's injuries
- Overtly rejects the child
- Describes the child as "evil," or in some other very negative way
- Uses harsh physical discipline with the child
- Constantly blames, belittles, or berates the child
- Seems unconcerned about the child
- Abuses alcohol or other drugs
- Has a history of abuse as a child

Of course, the presence of a single sign does not prove child abuse is occurring in a family. When these signs appear repeatedly or in combination, however, you should take a closer look at the situation and consider the possibility of child abuse. If you suspect that a child is being harmed, report the situation to the authorities immediately – before it's too late.

