

What Is Child Abuse?

There are four major types of child maltreatment: neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. Although any of the forms may be found separately, they often occur together.

Each state is responsible for providing its own definitions of child abuse and neglect that meet Federal minimum standards found in the Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act (CA PTA).

Most include the following:

Neglect is failure to provide for a child's basic needs. Neglect may be:

- Physical (e.g., lack of appropriate supervision or failure to provide necessary food, shelter, or medical care).
- Educational (e.g., failure to educate a child or attend to special education needs).
- Emotional (e.g., inattention to a child's emotional needs or exposure to domestic violence).

These situations do not always mean that a child is neglected. Sometimes cultural values, the standards of care in the community, and poverty may be contributing factors, indicating that the family is in need of information or assistance. When a family fails to use information and resources, and the child's needs continue to be unmet, then further child welfare professional intervention may be required.

Physical Abuse is 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. Such injury is considered abuse regardless of whether the caretaker intended to hurt the child.

Sexual Abuse includes activities by a parent or caretaker such as fondling a child's genitals, penetration, incest, rape, sodomy, indecent exposure, and commercial exploitation through prostitution or the production of pornographic materials.

Emotional Abuse is any 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.

Note: The Federal legislation that provides definitions is included in the Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act (CAPTA) reauthorization of 1996 (P.L. 106-177).