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Child Abuse Overview

Child abuse occurs when a parent or caregiver physically, emotionally, or sexually mistreats or exploits a child. Sadly, thousands of children fall victim to child abuse each day at the hands of someone they know or someone who is responsible for their safekeeping. A child who has been abused or neglected may experience a range of problems, such as relationship difficulties, lack of trust of adults, emotional outbursts (or retreat), low performance at school, depression, anxiety, and anger. Unfortunately, many cases of child abuse go unreported. In each state, child abuse laws require certain people to report suspected cases of child abuse -- or risk facing penalties although it's a good idea for *anyone* to report suspected instances of child abuse.

What is Child Abuse?

Child abuse is a crime that encompasses a variety of behaviors involving physical, emotional, or sexual mistreatment or neglect upon a child. [State child abuse laws](#) define child abuse as any act (or failure to act) that:

- Results in imminent risk or serious harm to a child's health and welfare due to physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- Of a child (typically under the age of 18)
- By a parent or caregiver who is responsible for the child's welfare

In most states, the harm must have been inflicted by non-accidental means. This includes intentional acts, actions that were careless (such as, allowing a known sexual offender or known abuser to be with a child alone), and acts of negligence (such as, leaving a child under a certain age at home alone). Also, the "harm" inflicted upon a child need not be actual, but may include "threats" or "risks of imminent harm".

In addition to state child abuse laws, all states have child protective services (CPS) agencies that investigate reports of abuse and neglect of children in a home. CPS also serves to place children who have been abused or neglected in safer homes, either through adoption or foster care.

Typical defenses include accident, wrongful accusations, and a parent's right to discipline.

Mandatory Reporting Laws

Every state has mandatory reporting laws that require [certain people](#) to report apparent or suspected child abuse to a central authority, such as via a [statewide toll-free hotline](#) . The reports -- which are often anonymous -- are meant to promote early intervention of child abuse.

Many states require "any person" to report suspected child abuse, whereas other states require mandatory reporting by certain professional, such as doctors, nurses, social workers, school officials, day care workers, and law enforcement personnel. In some states, failing to report instances of child abuse is considered a misdemeanor punishable by fines, jail time, or both.

Examples of warning signs of abuse of a child may include:

- *Physical abuse* - unexplained burns, bites, bruises, and broken bones or parent's philosophy of harsh physical discipline
- *Emotional abuse* - extreme behavior, delayed physical or emotional development, attempted suicide, and belittling by a parent or caregiver
- *Sexual abuse* - difficulty walking or sitting, reports of nightmares or bedwetting, sudden changes in appetite, sudden refusal to change in front of others or participate in gym activities
- *Neglect* - frequent absences from school, obvious lack of medical or dental care, severe body odor, stays home alone

For a summary of child abuse laws by state, click [here](#) .

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