



American Humane Fact Sheet

Child Physical Abuse

According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), three million children were reported in 2001 as victims of maltreatment. More than 903,000 of these children were substantiated or indicated abuse and neglect victims. And of these, 18% were determined to be victims of physical abuse. Further, an estimated 1,300 children died in 2001 as a result of child abuse and neglect. This figure is conservative due to the potential for misdiagnosis of cause of death.

What is child physical abuse?

Defined as non-accidental trauma or physical injury caused by punching, beating, kicking, biting, burning, or otherwise harming a child, physical abuse is the most visible form of child maltreatment.

Many times, physical abuse results from inappropriate or excessive physical discipline. A parent or caretaker in anger may be unaware of the magnitude of force with which he or she strikes the child.

Other factors that can contribute to child abuse include parents' immaturity, lack of parenting skills, poor childhood experiences, and social isolation, as well as situations of frequent crises, drug or alcohol problems, and domestic violence.

What should you look for if you suspect a child is being physically abused?

While injuries can occur accidentally when a child is at play, physical abuse should be suspected if the explanations do not fit the injury or if a pattern of frequency is apparent. The presence of many injuries in various stages of healing makes it obvious that the injuries did not all occur as a result of one accident.

Physical indicators of abuse include bruises; lacerations; swollen areas; and marks on the child's face, head, back, chest, genital area, buttocks, or thighs. Wounds like human bite marks, cigarette burns, broken bones, puncture marks, or missing hair may indicate abuse.

A child's behavior might also signal that something is wrong. Victims of physical abuse may display withdrawn or

aggressive behavioral extremes, complain of soreness or uncomfortable movement, wear clothing that is inappropriate for the weather, express discomfort with physical contact, or become chronic runaways.

What you can do

Discipline effectively. Remember that kids will be kids. Children can be loud, unruly, and destructive. They will break things, interrupt telephone conversations, track mud through the house, not pick up their toys or clean their rooms, struggle over eating their vegetables, or pester routinely. Children will inevitably do things that may make their parents feel irritated, frustrated, disappointed, and mad. Changing a child's behavior is not easy. However, children should not be disciplined through violence.

It is better to deny children privileges when they do something unacceptable, as well as reward them when they do something good. This teaches children that there are consequences for their actions.

Regain control. Child abuse is a symptom of having difficulty coping with stressful situations. If you feel you are losing control, ask someone to relieve you for a few minutes. Then try these tips:

- Count to 10.
- Take deep breaths.
- Phone a friend.
- Look through a magazine or newspaper.
- Listen to music.
- Exercise.
- Take a walk (first make certain that children are not left without supervision).
- Take a bath.
- Write a letter.
- Sit down and relax.
- Lie down.

Get help. Support is available for families at risk of abuse through local child protection services agencies, community centers, churches, physicians, mental health facilities, and schools.

Report, report, report. If you suspect child abuse is occurring, first report it to the local child protective services agency (often called "social services" or "human services") in



American Humane Fact Sheet

Child Physical Abuse *(continued)*

your county or state. Professionals who work with children are required by law to report reasonable suspicion of abuse or neglect. Furthermore, in 20 states, citizens who suspect abuse or neglect are required to report it. "Reasonable suspicion" based on objective evidence, which could be firsthand observation or statements made by a parent or child, is all that is needed to report.

What is NCANDS?

NCANDS is the primary source of national information on abused and neglected children known to public child protective services agencies. American Humane has provided technical assistance to this project since its beginning in 1990. For a copy of this report, contact the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information at (800) 394-3366 or <http://www.calib.com/nccanch>. The publication is also available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb>.

Resources

Cohn, A. H., & Gordon, T. (1986). *Tips on parenting*. Chicago, IL: NCPA.

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Jaudes, P., & Mitchel, L. (1992). *Physical child abuse*. Chicago, IL: NCPA.

US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect. (1995, April). *A nation's shame: Fatal child abuse and neglect in the United States*. Washington, DC: US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect.

US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families. (2003). *Child Maltreatment 2001*. (Washington, DC:US Government Printing Office).

Winterfeld, A., & Hunt, D. E. (2003). The legal framework for child protective services. In C. Brittain & D. E. Hunt (Eds.), *Helping in child protective services: A competency-based casework handbook*. New York: Oxford University Press.

American Humane is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the mission of protecting children and animals from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. For more information or to lend your support, please visit www.americanhumane.org or call (866) 242-1877.