



Physical Abuse & Young Children

Child Abuse in today's society is a very complicated issue.

For those people working with children (parents, Early Childhood Educators, babysitters, etc...), recognition of possible abuse is a necessary skill.

It is not the role of the person suspecting abuse to prove (or disprove) that abuse has occurred. That responsibility belongs to the workers of a Child Protective Services and the police. Any professional who fails to report a suspected case of abuse may face criminal charges for not reporting their suspicion.

Definition of Physical Abuse...

Physical Abuse is a non-accidental physical injury that happens as a result of actions or neglect on the part of a parent. Such injuries may include bruises, fractures, burns, or head and facial

injuries. The severity of the injuries may range from repeated minor bruising to head injuries causing brain damage and/or death. (for my purposes, an adult can be any adult and/or person who is in charge of the care of a child).

Characteristics of

Physical Abuse...

In our society, physical punishment is still accepted by many. It is critical for all caregivers to be alert to signs of physical punishment. Physical punishment causing bruises is unacceptable, since it indicates the child has been punished with force and lack of restraint.

Physical abuse can be found in every sector of society; it cuts across all social,

e^{conomic,}
r^{acial,} and
r^{eligious}


A project of The Florida Partnership for Parent Involvement


Center of Excellence ♦ Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute ♦ Florida Children's Forum
Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters ♦ Hillsborough County head start ♦ Hillsborough County Even Start


divisions.


The majority of abusive people do not have psychiatric disorders.

In fact, less than ten percent of abusive parents suffer from psychiatric conditions.

 Parents are responsible for inflicting abuse in about 95 percent of cases.




 Other family members of the family contribute very little to physical abuse, with siblings accounting for less than one percent.

 Babysitters are involved in less than four percent of the cases.

 Financial crisis or poverty can also play an important role in the dynamics of physical abuse. Financial crisis or poverty can add to the stress of daily living. However,

Physical abuse is not limited to the impoverished or to minority groups.

For physical abuse to occur, three factors need to be present:

-  an offender (for example: parent, foster parent, caregiver or guardian)
-  a child
-  a crisis or a frustrating event that triggers a violent reaction

The Offender...

Perhaps one of the most common features of abusive individuals is that they were abused by their own parents.

Usually, they grew up in a family where abuse and violence occurred regularly.

Offenders often see themselves as children and expect love and attention from a child because they did not receive it when they were children.

A considerable number of abusive parents come from broken homes, many were abandoned by their parents and were subsequently placed in a succession of foster homes or institutions.

Frequently, an individual with this type of upbringing will marry a person from a similar background, and the two will reinforce and complement each other's weaknesses.

It is not uncommon for these partners to live quite isolated from the rest of the community. They may have unlisted

phone numbers, no friends, and avoid contact with neighbors.

In many instances, their marriage was poorly planned and came about because the women became pregnant.

Severe marital problems are usually present, and depression is common, particularly in the mother. The majority of abusive parents were unloved as children, and were constantly rejected by their parents. They lack confidence and self-control, making them extremely vulnerable to stress.

Abusive parents may have a total lack of knowledge regarding normal child development.

For example, they may expect a 10 month old infant to learn to use the toilet. Some abusive parents perceive

their children as evil and believe their children have supernatural power over them.

In our society, mothers still provide the majority of child care, and so are responsible for most physical abuse of children.

When fathers are responsible for providing the bulk of day-to-day care, their rate of abuse rises. This relationship exists because child care, particularly when it involves difficult children, is demanding and often very frustrating. It can cause burnout in parents who are not prepared for the difficulty of the task.

Usually, only one parent is abusive, but often the other parent is aware and silent about the abuse.

The silent parent allows the abuse to continue, sometimes for many years. When the father is the abuser, he is also often physically violent towards his spouse or partner.

Children under the age of 3 are usually most vulnerable to physical abuse and constitute almost 70 percent of all cases of child physical abuse.

The major reason for this is that young children are more demanding, not fully verbal and cannot clearly tell anyone what is happening to them.

Often only one child in a family; the one who is more difficult or more demanding.

At other times, all the children who is extremely active, has a sleeping problem, has repeated and prolonged episodes of crying, or is difficult to nurture and satisfy is more likely to become the victim of physical abuse.

An early attachment between the parents and the young infant is important in establishing a healthy long-term relationship.

This attachment can be affected by early separation due to hospitalization, which sometimes happens when a child is premature or has multiple disabilities. This attachment can also be impaired if the parent(s) are not capable of establishing a relationship for medical or psychological reasons.

The Crisis and/or

Frustrating Event...

A stressful event in the family can precipitate abuse.

There are many events like this, including...

A severe marital dispute leading to separation or divorce,

Financial crisis,
The loss of a job,

A move to a new community, or

A death in the family.

Given high levels of stress, a number of things can trigger an episode of abuse;

A child who will not learn how to use the

Toilet,
Who spills food, or
Vomits or cries for long periods.

The child's behavior is upsetting for the parent who feels helpless or overwhelmed, and the parent expresses this frustration by trying to force the

child to obey using severe punishment.

Indicators of POSSIBLE

Physical Abuse...

Caregivers are in an important position when it comes to detecting possible signs of abuse and intervening by reporting the abuse so it can be stopped.

Physical abuse does not stop without intervention.






In fact, if a child is returned home after a diagnosis of physical abuse, and the family has not received treatment, the child is in grave danger. Not only will the abuse resume, but it will continue with even greater force than before. Children in this situation are in danger of suffering from severe injuries leading to death.


The presence of a number of the following behavioral and physical indicators may suggest that a child is being physically abused.

If caregivers see these indicators repeatedly, there may be a reason for concern.

Behavioral Indicators:

The following behavioral characteristics may be observed in a physically abused child:

-  comes to the child care center very early
-  not eager to return home
-  inappropriately dressed for the season and poorly cared for overall
-  withdrawn and overly complaint
-  sullen, at times aggressive
-  poor social skills
-  low self-esteem
-  unusually fearful and hyper-alert to the environment
-  reluctant to change clothing (for example, into a bathing suit)

 plays inappropriately with or without the use of toys


Many of the behavioral indicators mentioned above can be found in any situation that produces severe stress in the child, not just in physically abused children.

If problems are observed, a careful assessment of the family and other sources of stress must be considered by appropriate, skilled professionals.


It is the caregivers responsibility to report, not investigate, any suspicions of physical abuse. The investigation will be done by the child care protection agency.

Physical Indicators . . .


The following physical characteristics may be observed in a physically abused child:


 unexplained multiple bruises in unusually places (thighs, behind the knee, upper arm, back, neck, back of legs, etc).

 frequent bruises at different stages of healing

 bruises in the shape of objects such as belts, fingers, electric cord, rope

 unexplained burns

 scalding or burns in the genital area

 untreated burns or fractures, or severe physical complaints

 patches of baldness on the scalp

It is important to remember that native children as well as children from Mediterranean or Asian ancestry have dark pigmented areas at the tip of the spine, which at times extends into the buttocks. These spots are called mongolian spots; they are always of the same color and do not go through changes of color like bruises do.

In addition, female children might also have a bluish discoloration of the small lips (libia minora) in their genital area. This type of discoloration is permanent. It is often found in native children and should not be confused with a bruise. In case of doubt, caregivers should consult a physician.

What to do if Physical

Abuse is Suspected...

A suspicion of abuse may be based on observations of physical or behavioral indicators, or a child may disclose abuse to the caregiver.

Your center should have a written protocol and on site training for dealing with child abuse situations.

The following suggestions can help your center to create one if you do not have one in place or if you need to revise your existing one.

Caregivers should take the following steps if suspicion of physical abuse arises:

① Speak to your supervisor immediately. Work together to determine the best plan.

② If a child has problems related to an injury, seek immediate medical attention and notify the child protection agency.

These include

pain,
bleeding,
Considerable bruises, c uts,
Suspicious burns, or
Signs of physical discomfort.

③ Seek the advice of the child protection worker if a child has frequent, suspicious bruises, cuts or marks.

④ Seek the advice of the child protection worker if there is an

uncertainty about the interpretation of the physical and behavioral indicators

For more information contact:

and the explanation given by the child's parent.

⑤ Report disclosures by children regarding harsh punishment when there is evidence of bruising or other marks. It is the caregiver's legal obligation to report to the child protection worker.

This page has been adapted from the above web page created and maintained by Neil Fowler, E.C.E. Child Care Action Page"<http://www.freenet.hamilton.on.ca/~>.



The Center for Parent Involvement (FCPI) was funded by the U.S. Department of Education; Goals 2000, Educate America Act from 1994-1999. Guided by an advisory board of parents and professionals, the FCPI's goal was to tap the power of parents.

The FCPI gathered information on parent needs, coordinated the information, and created a series of resources organized by theme, including fact sheets for parents and professionals, "Beyond the Basics" resources, and resource identification lists. Many of the resources have been translated into Spanish language versions, and every effort has been made to preserve the meaning and flavor of the original English documents. This series of materials provides a wealth of current information for both parents and providers; the complete set of resources can be obtained in PDF format on the Department of Child and Family Studies Website at www.fmhi.usf.edu/cfs/dares/fcpi. The staff of the FCPI are hopeful that their work will continue to help children get ready to learn for many years to come.

The series' themes include:

- Family Empowerment
- Parent Involvement
- Parenting Support
- School Readiness
- Violence in the Lives of Children
- Transition to Kindergarten

The Center was one component of a project led by Hillsborough County Center of Excellence in collaboration with the Department of Child & Family Studies at USF's de la Parte Institute and the Florida Children's Forum. Other project partners include HIPPIY (Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters), Hillsborough County Head Start and Hillsborough County Even Start. For more information about these projects, call 813.974.4612.

Violence & Young Children, Beyond The Basics: Physical Abuse & Young Children

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