

CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

What is child abuse and neglect?

Child abuse is where an adult uses his or her power to harm a child. There are four broad types of abuse used to describe the different ways in which children are harmed:

Physical Abuse

where children's bodies are hurt or injured by, for example, hitting, kicking and beating. It can cause pain, cuts, bruising, broken bones and sometimes even death.

Emotional Abuse

includes degrading punishment, sarcasm, threats and not giving love and attention. All of these can undermine a child or young person's confidence.

Sexual Abuse

describes when children are forced or persuaded into sexual acts or situations by others.

Neglect

is when children's basic needs, such as food, warmth, medical care, clothing and hygiene, are not met.

Who abuses children?

There is no typical child abuser. In almost all cases of child abuse, the child knows the abuser. Usually abusers are people with intimate access to a child, whom the child loves or trusts and is dependent on for care. It may be a member of the child's family or another person in a position of trust. Children may also be abused by strangers though this is relatively rare.

What are the effects of child abuse?

All forms of abuse and neglect have a harmful effect on children and young people. Below is an outline of some of the most common effects:

Emotional scars

Children who suffer abuse or neglect feel most of the pain on the inside. Many children suffer low self-esteem and feelings of guilt, often blaming themselves for the abuse. Children can find it difficult to have trusting relationships and experience loneliness and bullying. Children often have feelings of hopelessness, hate, despair, misery, and rage, sometimes talking about feeling suicidal or self-harm.

Physical scars

Children can have direct physical effects such as bruising, cuts, broken bones, health problems, under-nourishment or even, death.

Impact on future wellbeing

Research shows that children who have suffered abuse are more likely to have lower educational attainment and suffer from drug and alcohol dependency. Long-term physical and mental health difficulties including depression can be a consequence. Research shows that many individuals who commit serious offences suffered from abuse during their childhood.

Impact on families

As well as the impact of abuse and neglect on the child themselves, their family can also be affected with family members anxious and unsure about how to support a child who has been abused. A child's behaviour and attitudes can be difficult to deal with, and families often struggle to know how to cope.

The Childline report

'What children say about being abused' (1995) notes:

'Take any book describing the effects of domestic violence on women, replace women with children and it will describe the impact of violence on children. Bruises and cuts, even broken bones, dislocated shoulders and burns heal. The physical pain they experience can be shortlived; what they suffer is an assault on their identity and spirit, on their trust and confidence in themselves and their parents and on their emotional development and their capacity to feel loved.'



How many children in Scotland are abused or neglected?

It is very difficult to tell how widespread child abuse and neglect is. This is because most child abuse is never reported, either by the child or by adults who know it is happening. It is also because there is no single source of information on child abuse and neglect in Scotland, and the sources of information that do exist miss out certain things.

The data that does exist includes statistics on the number of children referred to local authority social work departments, and the number of children on local authority child protection registers. There are also statistics collated about crimes committed against children. These statistics are published annually on the Scottish Government website at: www.scotland.gov.uk

However, the limitations of these statistics in showing the true extent of child abuse in Scotland should be borne in mind.

There has also been limited research into people's experiences of abuse and neglect. The most respected such study, 'Child Maltreatment in the UK',¹ asked a random sample of 2,689 young adults in 2000 about their experience of family life, abuse, bullying and discrimination. It found that, of the sample:

- 7% had experienced serious physical abuse by parents or carers;
- 6% had experienced serious absence of care (neglect);
- 5% had experienced serious abuse of supervision (neglect);
- 1% had experienced sexual abuse by parents or carers, almost always fathers or step fathers (if sexual harm involving physical contact by others is included, such as siblings and other children or young people, this figure rises to 11%); and
- 6% had experienced emotional abuse.

Very few of these cases of abuse had been reported to the authorities.

What happens after abuse of a child is reported?

Many people are reluctant to report suspected child abuse because they are afraid that the child will be taken away from home. This is not necessarily the case. The priority will be to stop the abuse, keeping the family together where possible. In a small number of cases where it is felt that the child will not be safe, a child may be looked after by a relative or the local authority. Most of these children return home as soon as it is felt that they will be safe.

When abuse or neglect of a child is reported to social work or the police, the following steps will usually be taken:

Investigation

The social work department or the police will first make initial enquiries and decide to either take no action or offer support to the family, or if the referral is serious enough, a formal investigation will begin. This investigation will be carried out jointly by the police and social work if it appears that a crime may have been committed. If the investigation finds that action is required to protect the child, a case conference will then be held.

If at any stage after the reporting of abuse there is a need for urgent action to protect the child from immediate danger, there are procedures for temporarily removing the child from his or her home until investigations are complete.

Case conference

A case conference is a meeting of all the different services who may be involved with the child and may therefore have relevant information. It can include the social worker for the child and family, doctors, teachers, health visitors, the police and nursery staff. The case conference will assess the risk to the child, decide if the child's name should be placed on the child protection register, and decide on any action that is needed to protect the child. The case conference will also decide whether to refer the child to the Children's Reporter.

Children's Reporter

The Children's Reporter is an independent person who has statutory powers for the protection and well-being of children. When the Children's Reporter receives information that a child may be in need of 'compulsory supervision' (see below), they must make further enquiries in order to decide what to do. They will decide either to take no further action, refer the child to the social work department for voluntary supervision, or refer the child to a children's hearing.

Children's Hearing

Children's hearings are informal tribunals which make decisions about the care, protection and supervision of children based on their best interests. A children's hearing is made up of trained volunteer members of the public who listen to what the children and his or her parents/ carers say and read reports written by social work on the case. Children's hearings assess all the information about the case and try to come to an agreement between the family and professionals about the best thing for the child. They can make a 'compulsory supervision requirement' if necessary – this requirement can be that a child must live in a certain place such as with a relative, in foster care, a children's home or in secure accommodation. It can also give authority for a child's liberty to be restricted and can include other conditions such as regulating the child's contact with a particular person.

What to do if you are experiencing abuse or neglect

If you are a child or young person, and you are unhappy or worried about something that is happening to you, it is important that you tell someone.

If you are unable to talk to your parents, you could think about talking to another adult you trust, for example, a relative, a teacher or youth club leader. You could also contact the social work department or police directly.

You can also phone ChildLine –

Tel: 0800 1111 which is a helpline for children and young people who need to speak about any kind of problem, including abuse. A call to ChildLine is free at any time of the day or night. It won't show up on the phone bill and is confidential. You can find out more about ChildLine on their website at: www.childline.org.uk

What to do if you are concerned about a child's safety

You may know or suspect that a child is experiencing abuse or neglect. If you are unsure of what to do, where to go, or afraid of what will happen if you tell someone – you are not alone. Many people feel this way. Child protection is every adult's responsibility. By voicing your concerns, you could help prevent a child being abused or harmed.

If a child tells you that they have been abused:

- let them know that you take them seriously
- praise them for telling you;
- tell them that it is not their fault; and
- talk with the child about what needs to happen next.

Every situation is different. If you would like to talk things through, you can call our free helpline ParentLine Scotland on 0808 800 2222. We will listen and help you work through what you need to do and what support is available. You can also call the Scottish child protection information line on 0800 022 3222.

If you think a child is in immediate danger, you can call the police. You can also contact your local social work department, anonymously if you wish, to inform them about your concerns – their contact details are in your local phone book.

For 'Top Ten Tips' on how you can take action to protect children, go to www.children1st.org.uk

CHILDREN 1ST services protecting children and young people

All CHILDREN 1ST services for children and their families are aimed at giving vulnerable children a safe, secure and happy childhood. They do this in different ways: from advice on the phone via ParentLine Scotland or ChildLine in Scotland (managed by CHILDREN 1ST in Scotland on behalf of the NSPCC), to befriending support for children who are experiencing difficulties; from helping families to make safe decisions about children, to support for families where there are issues of substance misuse. In particular, our Child Protection in Sport service, jointly funded by CHILDREN 1ST and sportscotland, helps to keep children safe as they engage in sport.

CHILDREN 1ST also has 8 services in different areas of Scotland who work with children and young people to help them recover from the impact of abuse or neglect. The abuse recovery support is shaped to suit the individual child and their family and can include a range of methods and activities. For example, abuse recovery services can often include:

- Play Therapy
- Counselling
- Storytelling
- Structured discussion with parents and wider family group
- Art and drama
- Educational support
- Group work

For more information about these services, see: www.children.org.uk

CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN ABUSED FEEL THE PAIN MOSTLY ON THE INSIDE

CHILDREN 1ST calls for action to better protect children

CHILDREN 1ST believes that, whilst we can unfortunately never fully eliminate child abuse and neglect, all adults have a responsibility to do all that they can to help keep children safe and happy. We also believe that Scotland needs to respond better to children when they have experienced abuse or neglect. We campaign for:

- a child-friendly child protection system, where the response of professionals to children talking about abuse or neglect is shaped by the child's best interests at every stage. This includes enabling confidential space where, unless there is immediate danger, a child is able to talk about abuse and get appropriate support before any investigation is undertaken.
- a Scottish society where all adults feel confident and informed so that they take action to protect the welfare of children that they see or know.

- children who have experienced abuse or neglect to get support when and where they need it. The current shortage of therapeutic support services for children and young people in many areas of Scotland should be addressed as a matter of priority.
- the Scottish judicial system to better protect the welfare and interests of children by improving the experience of child witnesses. Intermediaries, who put court questioning into child-friendly language, should be introduced, training for legal personnel on the needs of children, and implementation of the Vulnerable Witnesses Act 2004 evaluated with robust data collection to ensure that improvements are fully embedded.

You can find out more about CHILDREN 1ST's policy work and the work that CHILDREN 1ST is doing to promote the rights and protection of vulnerable children in Scotland, at: www.children1st.org.uk

References

i Cawson, P. et al (2000) Child Maltreatment in the United Kingdom: a study of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect, London: NSPCC.

We can help you take action to achieve change where it is needed.

For further information about CHILDREN 1ST and to order any of our publications, please contact:
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For more information on child abuse and neglect or to find out how you can help visit our website:
www.children1st.org.uk



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