

# Recognizing Child Abuse and Neglect: Signs and Symptoms



The first step in helping children who have been abused or neglected is learning to recognize the signs of maltreatment. The presence of a single sign does not necessarily mean that child maltreatment is occurring in a family, but a closer look at the situation may be warranted when these signs appear repeatedly or in combination. It is important to note that not all child abuse occurs within the family unit; a child can be abused by a trusted adult or other person in the community.

## Signs Of General Maltreatment

While it's important to know the signs of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and neglect, the following signs of general maltreatment also can help determine whether a child needs help:

### Child

- Shows sudden changes in behavior or school performance
- Has not received help for physical, educational, or medical problems brought to the parents' or caregivers' attention
- Is always watchful, as though preparing for something bad to happen or is overly compliant, passive, or withdrawn
- Comes to school or other activities early, stays late, and does not want to go home
- Is reluctant to be around a particular person
- Discloses maltreatment

### Parent/Caregiver

- Denies the existence of—or blames the child for—the child's problems in school or at home
- Asks teachers or other caregivers to use harsh physical discipline if the child misbehaves
- Sees the child as entirely bad, worthless, or burdensome
- Demands a level of physical or academic performance the child cannot achieve
- Looks primarily to the child for care, attention, and satisfaction of the parent's emotional needs and/or shows little concern for the child

- The first step in helping a child who has been abused or neglected is to recognize the signs of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and neglect.
- The presence of a single sign does not necessarily mean that child abuse or neglect is occurring in the family.
- A closer look may be warranted when the signs appear repeatedly or in combination.
- Not all abuse occurs within the family unit. A child can be abused by a trusted adult or other person in the community.
- Help is available through the National Child Abuse Hotline (1.800.422.4453) and Connecticut's Careline (1.800.842.2288).

### Parent and Child

- Touch or look at each other rarely
- Consider their relationship entirely negative
- State consistently they do not like each other

The preceding list is not a comprehensive list of the signs of maltreatment. It is important to pay attention to other behaviors that may seem unusual or concerning. Additionally, the presence of these signs does not necessarily mean that a child is being maltreated; there may be other causes. They are, however, indicators that others should be concerned about the child's welfare, particularly when multiple signs are present or they occur repeatedly.



Wheeler

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Clearinghouse

a program of the Connecticut Center  
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800.232.4424 (phone)

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[www.ctclearinghouse.org](http://www.ctclearinghouse.org)

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

## Signs Of Physical Abuse

A child who exhibits the following signs may be a victim of physical abuse:

- Has unexplained injuries, such as burns, bites, bruises, or broken bones
- Has fading bruises or other noticeable marks after an absence from school
- Seems scared, anxious, depressed, withdrawn, or aggressive
- Seems frightened of his or her parents or caregivers
- Shrinks at the approach of adults
- Shows changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Reports injury by a parent or another adult caregiver

## Signs Of Neglect

A child who exhibits the following signs may be a victim of neglect:

- Is frequently absent from school
- Begs or steals food or money
- Lacks needed medical care (including immunizations), dental care, or glasses
- Is consistently dirty and has severe body odor
- Lacks sufficient clothing for the weather

## Signs Of Sexual Abuse

A child who exhibits the following signs may be a victim of sexual abuse:

- Has difficulty walking or sitting and/or experiences bleeding, bruising, or swelling in their private parts
- Suddenly refuses to go to school
- Reports nightmares or bedwetting and/or experiences a sudden change in appetite
- Demonstrates bizarre, sophisticated, or unusual sexual knowledge or behavior
- Becomes pregnant or contracts a sexually transmitted disease, particularly if under age 14
- Runs away
- Reports sexual abuse by a parent or another adult caregiver
- Attaches very quickly to strangers or new adults in their environment

## Signs Of Emotional Abuse

A child who exhibits the following signs may be a victim of emotional abuse:

- Shows extremes in behavior, such as being overly compliant or demanding, extremely passive, or aggressive
- Is either inappropriately adult (e.g., parenting other children) or inappropriately infantile (e.g., frequently rocking or head-banging)
- Is delayed in physical or emotional development
- Shows signs of depression or suicidal thoughts
- Reports an inability to develop emotional bonds with others

## Help Is Available

A person who suspects or has confirmed that a child is being abused can get help for the child by calling the National Child Abuse Hotline at 1.800.422.4453 or the Connecticut Department of Children and Families Careline at 1.800.842.2288.

## Connecticut Resources

**CT Department of Mental  
Health and Addiction Services**  
[www.ct.gov/DMHAS](http://www.ct.gov/DMHAS)

**CT Department of Children and  
Families Careline**  
1.800.842.2288

**Talk It Out**  
[www.talkitoutct.com](http://www.talkitoutct.com)  
1.833.258.5011

## National Resources

**Childhelp National Child Abuse  
Hotline**  
1.800.422.4453

**Prevent Child Abuse America**  
[www.preventchildabuse.org](http://www.preventchildabuse.org)



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Mental Health & Addiction Services