

Recognising Signs of Abuse and Neglect

2.1 Understanding and identifying abuse and neglect

Abuse and neglect are forms of maltreatment - a person may abuse by inflicting harm or failing to prevent harm. Children and adults in need of protection may be abused within a family, an institution, or a community setting. Very often the abuser is known or is in a trusted relationship with the child or adult at risk. An abused child will often experience more than one type of abuse, as well as other difficulties in their lives.

N.B. The following descriptions of abuse focus mainly on children but may also apply to adults at risk.

Physical abuse

Physical abuse is deliberately physically hurting a child or adult at risk. It might take a variety of different forms, including hitting, pinching, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning, or scalding, drowning, or suffocating.

Physical abuse can happen in any family, but children may be more at risk if their parents have problems with drugs, alcohol, or mental ill-health. Babies and disabled children also have a higher risk of suffering physical abuse.

Physical harm may also be caused when a parent or carer deliberately fabricates the symptoms of, or deliberately induces, illness in a child. Physical abuse can also occur outside the family environment.

Some of the following signs may be indicators of physical abuse:

- Children with frequent injuries;
- Children with unexplained or unusual fractures or broken bones;

Children with unexplained:

- bruises or cuts;
- burns or scalds; or
- bite marks

Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse is the persistent emotional maltreatment of a child or adult at risk. It is also sometimes called psychological abuse and it can have severe and persistent adverse effects on a child's emotional development.

Although the effects of emotional abuse might take a long time to be recognisable, it may be observed e.g. in the way that a parent interacts with their child. Emotional abuse may involve deliberately telling someone that they are worthless or unloved and inadequate. It may include not

giving opportunities for the person to express their views, deliberately silencing them or 'making fun' of what they say or how they communicate.

Emotional abuse may involve serious bullying – including online bullying through social networks, online games, or mobile phones – by peers.

Some of the following signs may be indicators of emotional abuse:

- Children who are excessively withdrawn, fearful, or anxious about doing something wrong;
- Parents or carers who withdraw their attention from their child, giving the child the 'cold shoulder;'
- Parents or carers blaming their problems on their child;
- Parents or carers who humiliate their child, for example, by name-calling or making negative comparisons.

Sexual abuse and exploitation (SSE)

Sexual abuse of a child occurs if they are forced or persuaded to take part in sexual activities. Many children and young people who are subjected to sexual abuse do not recognise themselves as victims. A child or vulnerable young person or adult may not understand what is happening and may not even understand that it is wrong. Sexual abuse of an adult at risk occurs if the person is made to engage in any sexual activity without their consent or when they lack capacity to consent.

Sexual abuse may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing, and touching outside clothing. It may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in the production of sexual images, forcing children to look at sexual images or watch sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways or grooming a child in preparation for abuse (including via the internet).

Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children.

Some of the following may be indicators of sexual abuse:

- Children who display knowledge or interest in sexual acts inappropriate to their age;
- Children who use sexual language or have sexual knowledge that you do not expect them to have;
- Children who ask others to behave sexually or play sexual games;
- Children with physical sexual health problems, including soreness in the genital and anal areas, sexually transmitted infections, or underage pregnancy.

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

Child sexual exploitation is a form of sexual abuse where children are sexually exploited for money, power, or status. It can involve violent or humiliating and degrading sexual assaults. In some cases, young people are persuaded or forced into exchanging sexual activity for money, gifts, affection, or

status. Consent cannot be given, even where a child may believe they are voluntarily engaging in sexual activity with the person who is exploiting them.

Some of the following signs may be indicators of sexual exploitation:

- Children who appear with unexplained gifts or new possessions
- Children who associate with other young people involved in exploitation
- Children who have older boyfriends or girlfriends
- Children who suffer from sexually transmitted infections or become pregnant
- Children who suffer from changes in emotional well-being
- Children who misuse drugs and alcohol
- Children who go missing for periods of time or regularly come home late
- Children who regularly miss school or education or do not take part in education.

Neglect

Neglect is a pattern of failing to provide for a child's, or adult at risk's, basic needs, whether it be adequate food, clothing, hygiene, supervision, or shelter. It is likely to result in the serious impairment of a child's health or development.

Neglect may occur if a parent becomes physically or mentally unable to care for a child. A parent may also have an addiction to alcohol or drugs, which could impair their ability to keep a child safe or result in them prioritising buying drugs, or alcohol over clothing or warmth for the child. Neglect may occur during pregnancy as a result of maternal drug or alcohol abuse.

Some of the following signs may be indicators of neglect:

- Children who are living in a home that is indisputably dirty or unsafe;
- Children who are left hungry or dirty;
- Children who are left without adequate clothing, e.g. not having a winter coat;
- Children who are living in dangerous conditions, i.e. around drugs, alcohol, or violence;
- Children who are often angry, aggressive or who self-harm;
- Parents who fail to seek medical treatment when their children are ill or are injured.

Other forms of abuse

Include financial or legal abuse which is the wilful manipulation or extortion of a person's civil rights (child or adult at risk). It may include the misappropriation of monies or goods, misuse of finances, property, or possessions. This may include theft, fraud, exploitation, pressure in connection with wills, property, or inheritance or financial transactions. Such abuse may involve the use of a position of authority to persuade a person to make gifts, leave legacies or change a will.