

Identifying Child Abuse and Neglect

Many people assume that child abuse and neglect only happens in poor and disadvantaged homes. Child abuse and neglect can happen in homes of all socioeconomic levels.

The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) defines child abuse and neglect at minimum:

- "Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation"; or
- "An act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm."

According to the [Child Maltreatment Reportⁱ](#) by the Children's Bureau, in fiscal year 2017, of the 3.5 million children who were involved in a child protection investigation, around 674,000 children were victims of maltreatment. Most were victims of neglect (74.9 percent), 18.3 percent were physically abused and 8.6 percent experienced sexual abuse.

Early identification and intervention of child abuse and neglect is critical to ensuring that children and youth have healthier and happier lives as kids and as adults.

The Impact of Trauma with Maltreatment

Experiencing child maltreatment can cause profound and permanent delays and damage to a child's development in all areas of their life: physical, emotional, social, cognitive and spiritual. Impaired brain development can cascade into a whole host of other developmental, physical and mental health issues, including anxiety, aggression, depression and high distractibility.

When working with children and youth who have histories of abuse or neglect, you'll need a lot of patience and empathy. These children have developed misplaced coping mechanisms to survive very difficult events. Their parents may also have trauma histories and may not trust you. They may see you as a threatening enemy or as a competitor to whom they can't measure up.

What You Can Do

Depending on your state and your role, you may be a mandated reporter, meaning you must report child abuse or neglect to the authorities. The Child Welfare Information Gateway provides current information on [state mandatory reportingⁱⁱ](#).

Prevention is the best strategy for child maltreatment. The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2018) offers six protective factors that can strengthen families, help prevent maltreatment and promote healthy brain development. Our work can focus on promoting these protective factors:

- **Nurturing and attachment.** Promoting compassion and warmth between parents and children can help parents provide better support to their children.
- **Knowledge of parenting and of child and youth development.** Assisting parents in understanding their children's developmental milestones helps children reach their full potential.
- **Parental resilience.** Build parental resilience by offering support that is identified by the parent and specific to their needs.

- **Social connections.** Supportive family friends can provide emotional support to parents.
- **Concrete supports for parents.** Help parents meet the basic needs of their children and gain access to services such as childcare and mental health care.
- **Social and emotional competence for children.** Parents who teach their children how to interact with others, control their behaviors and communicate their feelings help their children have better relationships with everyone.

Resources

Child Maltreatment Report 2017. Retrieved from Children’s Bureau | ACF website:

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/child-maltreatment-2017>

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2015). *Understanding the Effects of Maltreatment on Brain Development*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau. Retrieved from: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue-briefs/brain-development/>

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2019). *What is child abuse and neglect? Recognizing the signs and symptoms*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau. Retrieved from: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/whatiscan/>

Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect in Federal Law – Child Welfare Information Gateway. Retrieved from <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/defining/federal/>

Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect – Child Welfare Information Gateway. Retrieved from <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/manda/>

Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect – Child Welfare Information Gateway. Retrieved from <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/preventingcan/>

ⁱ <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/child-maltreatment-2017>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/manda/>