NSPCC

NEED-TO-KNOW GUIDES

Worried about a child?



EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

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We know that for every child reported to be at risk of harm and abuse, there are many others living in difficult situations who come to the attention of no one. We want to help these children and believe that, together, we can make a positive difference to their lives.

We're here to help. If you're worried about a child, you can call our helpline on **0808 800 5000**

What is child abuse?

Every child's situation is different but the most common types of abuse are:

- **Physical abuse**
  This involves the hurting or injuring of a child by ways such as hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning and suffocating.
- **Sexual abuse**
  This involves forcing or persuading a child to take part in sexual activities. This could be directly – by touching a child – or indirectly, for example, making a child watch sexual activities or act in a sexualised way online. It includes grooming a child in preparation for abuse, often via the internet. Child sexual exploitation is a form of sexual abuse.
- **Emotional abuse**
  This includes a child being repeatedly rejected, humiliated, bullied, or scared, and "denying" their self-worth.
- **Neglect**
  This is the repeated or continued failure to meet a child's basic needs such as food, warmth and love. It also includes failing to supervise a child effectively, such as leaving a child at home alone for long periods and failing to provide an education and access to medical care.

Each form of abuse can have a significant impact on a child. Try to imagine:

- living in fear of being hurt by someone who should be looking after you (physical abuse)
- being forced or threatened into a sexual act against your will (sexual abuse)
- being repeatedly told that "you're useless and I wish you'd never been born" (emotional abuse)
- being hungry and having no one to turn to (neglect).

Bullying is also abusive and can include both physical and emotional abuse.

Children living in difficult situations, such as growing up with domestic violence, or in households where parents misuse drugs/alcohol or have mental health problems, are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Whatever the reason a child is at risk, we believe everything possible should be done to help.

How do I know if a child is being abused?

It's an uncomfortable truth, but child abuse can be committed by anyone – both male and female adults and even other children or young people. This can sadly include people who are close to you, who you'd expect to trust, including members of your family. Only a small minority of cases of child abuse involve a stranger. Abuse happens in all walks of life and in all communities.

Abuse is frightening and often hidden, so abused children may communicate their distress in different ways other than directly saying what's happening to them. Some children may also have additional needs or not have the vocabulary, understanding or confidence to say what is happening. In the case of neglect, children rarely talk about it, so it's vital to recognise the signs. Common concerning signs of different forms of abuse include those in the table opposite.

A child may experience more than one form of abuse.
The possible signs can vary according to the child's age. If a child displays any of these signs it doesn't definitely mean they are being abused, and there may be an acceptable explanation. But it does suggest they may need extra help, or be a cause for concern that may need reporting or looking into by professionals.

Types of abuse and what to look out for

Physical signs of abuse:

Neglect	Physical	Sexual	Emotional
• repeated or constant hunger or stealing food from others • repeatedly or constantly being dirty or smelly • loss of weight or being constantly underweight • wearing unseasonal clothing (eg having no coat in winter).	• unexplained bruising or injuries • multiple bruises in clusters or in unusual places • cigarette burns • human bite marks • scalds with upward splash marks.	• pain or itching in the genital area • bruising or bleeding near genital area • vaginal discharge or infection • discomfort when walking or sitting down • pregnancy.	While there may be physical signs, such as looking withdrawn or changes in weight, emotional abuse is mainly identified through changes in behaviour.

Changes in behaviour:

• a baby constantly crying • repeatedly or continually complaining of being tired • not receiving necessary medical assistance (eg not being taken to appointments) • having few friends • being seen or mentioning being left alone or unsupervised • being quiet and withdrawn • frequently being angry and moody.	• a baby constantly crying • fear of their parents being asked for an explanation • aggressive behaviour or severe temper outbursts • flinching when approached or touched • a reluctance to get changed in front of others • depression • withdrawn behaviour • running away from home.	• becoming aggressive or withdrawn • expressing a fear of being left alone with a specific person • having nightmares or bedwetting • running away from home • having sexual knowledge beyond their age and stage • acting in a sexually explicit way • sexual drawings or language • eating disorders, self-harm or suicide attempts • talking about secrets they can't share • having unexplained presents (eg a new mobile phone).	• frequent neurotic behaviour (eg sulking, hair twisting or rocking) • fear of making mistakes • sudden speech disorders • self-harm • signs of depression • difficulties in interpreting emotions • aggression and hostility.

How can I help?

Whether a child tells you they are being abused or you have concerns based on other signs, such as their behaviour, it's important to act on your concerns. Trust your judgement and don't wait until you're certain.

If a child decides to tell you that they have been abused, they'll be looking for your support. While this news may come as a shock, try to compose yourself as quickly as you can, and then follow our tips on the page opposite.

It might never be fully clear why a child has decided to tell someone they're being abused. Factors such as the abuse getting worse, being unable to cope with the abuse, wanting justice or hoping to protect siblings can all contribute to their decision.



Remember

Dealing with such news may be very upsetting for you and, while it's important to avoid taking your own action against an abuser, it may be helpful to get support for yourself at a later stage. You can always contact an NSPCC helpline practitioner for support on 0808 800 5000.

If a child tells you they've been abused:

1. limit distractions such as people who could interrupt your discussion
2. allow the child to share what they want with you; your role is to listen rather than ask lots of questions
3. offer emotional support; this can include telling them you believe them and will take action to help them
4. explain the next steps you will be taking, which should include immediately reporting what you have been told to the police, children's services (England and Wales), the Gateway services team (Northern Ireland), the local children's social work services team (Scotland) or the NSPCC helpline
5. reassure them that it's not their fault and they won't get into trouble
6. explain that although they may want you to keep this a secret, it's important to report it
7. remind children that they can contact Childline (**0800 1111** and **childline.org.uk**) for free, confidential help.

Things you can do

Even if a child doesn't tell you they are being abused, there are still things you can do to help them. It may be that the child isn't ready to tell anyone about what is happening and some children will never feel able to tell, but you can give them support.

You can...

- Build your relationship to help them feel at ease when discussing issues with you.
- Let them know they can always discuss concerns with you in the future if they want. If a child is worried about trying to find the right words, suggest that they may find it easier to write their worries down in a letter or email. Or let them know that they could speak to another trusted adult.



- Explain that a child never needs to feel alone, even if they needlessly think they have acted in a way others will disapprove of. Give them the contact details for Childline (**0800 1111** and **childline.org.uk**) and explain that it's a free and confidential service.
- Don't take it personally. There could be a variety of reasons a child doesn't want to open up to you – ranging from embarrassment to wanting to protect you.
- Talk to professionals who work with the child about your worries, for example a teacher, your GP or a health visitor, or discuss your concerns with a trained NSPCC helpline practitioner on **0808 800 5000** for further help and advice.
- Offer support or babysitting to a family under stress. The whole family may benefit from the parents taking a break.

How can I be sure?



It's natural to worry about how people might react to you reporting a concern. To help with this, you could talk it over with a trusted or close friend. You can also talk to the NSPCC helpline without giving your name. This means that you can help a child while not having to worry about someone knowing it was you who reported the concern.

What if I'm wrong?
You might have doubts about reporting your concerns, and start to think "What if I'm wrong?" But the most important thing to consider is "What if I'm right?" Imagine how hard it would have been for that child to tell you about their situation. If you don't report your concerns, the abuse may continue.

The best way to make sure a child is safe is to let child protection professionals assess the situation. That's exactly what will happen when the NSPCC helpline receives your call. Child abuse is complicated, but when it comes to calling our helpline, it's a simple case of "better safe than sorry".

"What if I'm right?"

Supporting your child if they're worried about a friend

While children may tell adults they have been abused, they may also talk to their friends about it. Friends can offer emotional support and advice but can also help end the abuse another child is experiencing by speaking out and getting help.

Talk to your child about the importance of sharing any concerns for their friend's safety with you. Explain that while being loyal is a good thing, if someone else is at risk the most important thing is to get help, even if it means breaking a promise.

Supporting a friend can be an emotional experience for a child, so let them know that they can always contact Childline on **0800 1111** or at **childline.org.uk** if they want to talk things over with someone.

And remember, of course, that friends of your children may want to confide in you and seek your advice about worries that they have.

Childline is a service provided by the NSPCC. It's free, confidential, and open 24/7.



Who can I talk to?

We're here for you, every day of the year. If you're worried about a child, please get in touch with us.

Our trained experts at the NSPCC helpline can give you advice, help or support.

Call **0808 800 5000**

Email help@nspcc.org.uk

Or talk to us online at nspcc.org.uk/help

You can also speak to your local council's children's services (England and Wales), your local children's social work services team (Scotland) or the Gateway services team (Northern Ireland) if you think a child is being abused.

If you think a child may be in immediate danger, please contact **999**.

Other useful resources

Talking PANTS is a simple way to help parents keep their children safe from sexual abuse. Each letter, from P to S, provides a message about how to stay safe. Download the PANTS parent guide at nspcc.org.uk/underwear

Our parenting advice can help you with questions like when it's OK to leave your child home alone, and how to keep children safe online.
nspcc.org.uk/parenting

Family Lives provides help and support on all aspects of parenting and family life, and runs Parentline.
0808 800 2222
parentsupport@familylives.org.uk
familylives.org.uk

Parenting NI (Northern Ireland) has support and advice on parenting and family life.
0808 8010 722
parentingni.org

Family Information Services in Wales
Provides information, support and guidance on all aspects of childcare, and children and young people's services.
Search: **gov.wales**

ParentLine Scotland gives free telephone advice to any adult caring for a child in Scotland. (Provided by Children 1st).
0800 028 2233
parentlinescotland@children1st.org.uk

You're not alone

Having worries about a child is an uncomfortable feeling. Whether you're concerned about your own child or another child, not knowing what to do or questioning if you've got things wrong can make it hard to act upon your worries.

We can help you, and give you the confidence to make the right call.



This booklet is full of advice and information to help you recognise child abuse and neglect, and get help to children and parents that need it.

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