

Handout – The main signs of abuse

There are a number of indicators that practitioners should be aware of as signs of child abuse or neglect. These should be taken seriously and investigated further whilst also appreciating that there may be other explanations.

Physical abuse

Physical abuse can include hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning, scalding, suffocating or causing any form of physical harm to a child.

Possible signs of physical abuse include:

- unexplained injuries or burns
- refusal to discuss injuries
- improbable explanations of injuries
- untreated injuries or lingering illness
- admission of punishment which appears excessive
- shrinking from physical contact
- fear of returning home or parents being contacted
- fear of undressing
- fear of medical help
- aggression/bullying
- over-compliant behaviour
- running away
- significant changes in behaviour
- deterioration in work
- unexplained pattern of absences.

Emotional abuse

This is persistent emotional ill-treatment of a child such as to cause severe and persistent adverse effects on their emotional development. It can include:

- conveying to a child that they are worthless or unloved
- placing inappropriate age-related expectations on children
- making children feel frightened or in danger on a regular basis.

Possible signs of emotional abuse include:

- continual self-deprecation
- fear of new situations
- inappropriate emotional responses to painful situations
- self-harm or mutilation
- compulsive stealing/scrounging
- drug/solvent abuse
- 'neurotic' behaviour – obsessive rocking, thumb-sucking
- air of detachment; 'don't care' attitude
- social isolation
- attention-seeking behaviour

- eating problems
- depression or withdrawal.

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. These can include non-contact activities such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, pornographic material or watching sexual activities, or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways.

Possible signs of sexual abuse include:

- bruises, scratches, burns or bite marks
- scratches, abrasions or persistent infection in the anal or genital regions
- pregnancy
- sexual awareness inappropriate to the child's age
- frequent public masturbation
- attempts to teach other children about sexual activity
- refusing to stay with certain people or go to certain places
- aggressiveness, anger, anxiety, tearfulness
- withdrawal from friends.

Neglect

Neglect is also a form of abuse. This is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs and can affect the child's health and development. It might include failure to provide adequate food, shelter and clothing, failure to protect a child from physical harm or danger, or failure to ensure appropriate access to medical care and treatment. The psychological needs can be neglected if there is an unresponsiveness to a child's basic emotional, social and educational needs.

Possible signs of neglect include:

- constant hunger
- poor personal hygiene
- inappropriate clothing
- frequent lateness or non-attendance
- untreated medical problems
- low self-esteem
- poor social relationships
- compulsive stealing or scrounging
- constant tiredness.

Staff should also be aware of the possibility of peer on peer abuse. This is most likely to include but may not be limited to:

- bullying
- physical abuse such as kicking, shaking, biting, hair pulling or otherwise causing physical harm
- sexual violence and sexual harassment
- sexting
- initiation/hazing type violence and rituals.

The way the child interacts with adults can be particularly revealing. For example, you might have concerns about a child who shows excessively 'good' behaviour to prevent parent or carer disapproval. Alternatively, the child may not seek affection from an appropriate adult when distressed

or even show excessive comforting behaviour when parents are distressed themselves. Practitioners who are able to witness adult and child together, for example during school-entry home visits, are in a particularly good position to pick up on these signs.