

Guidance Notes

Recognising the signs of child abuse:

What is child abuse?

Most children receive the love and care they need to grow up as healthy and happy young people. However some children can end up being hurt and neglected. This means that they may not be treated in a safe and proper manner. Someone may abuse or neglect a child by inflicting harm or by failing to prevent harm. Children may be abused in a family or in an institutional or community setting, usually by people known to them and sometimes by strangers. We may choose to believe that such abuse does not occur within our communities, families or organisations. However incidents of abuse occur in all settings and can be perpetrated by anyone.

The main forms of child abuse are: Physical abuse, Emotional abuse, Sexual abuse, and Neglect.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is deliberately causing physical harm to a child. This might involve punching, kicking, biting, burning, shaking, throwing or beating with objects. Using belts, whips, sticks or other similar objects as a form of administering discipline is also considered physical abuse. It may also include poisoning, giving a child alcohol or illegal drugs, drowning or suffocation. Allowing other children to physically harm a child can also be physical abuse.

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is where repeated verbal threats, criticism, ridicule, shouting, or lack of love, affection and warmth emotionally harms a child. It includes conveying to children that they are worthless, unloved, inadequate, or valued only if they meet the needs of another person. Emotional abuse can also include constantly belittling or threatening a child. It may involve causing children to feel frightened or in danger. Some level of emotional abuse is involved in all types of ill treatment of children.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse involves any contact or interaction where a child or adolescent is used for the sexual stimulation of an older, stronger or more influential person. This may involve direct or indirect sexual exploitation or corruption of children by involving them in inappropriate sexual activities. It includes any touching, stimulating, rubbing, or patting that is meant to arouse sexual pleasure in the offender. Sexual abuse can also involve sexual contact between a significantly older child and a younger child. In addition, it includes exposing children to pornography and unsuitable videos.

Neglect

Neglect means failing to provide basic essential care of children. Neglect happens when a parent or carer fails to provide adequate food, housing, clothes, medical care, or necessary supervision to protect children from physical harm or danger. It also includes failure to ensure access to education or to look after a child because the carer is under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

What are the possible signs of abuse?

The following signs may or may not be indicators that abuse has taken place, but the possibility should be considered.

Signs of possible physical abuse

- Any injuries not consistent with the explanation given for them
- Injuries which occur to the body in places which are not normally exposed to falls, rough games and so on
- Injuries which have not received medical attention
- Reluctance to change for, or participate in, games or swimming
- Bruises, bites, burns and fractures, for example, which do not have an accidental explanation
- The child gives inconsistent accounts for the cause of injuries
- Frozen watchfulness

Signs of possible sexual abuse

- Any allegations made by a child concerning sexual abuse
- The child has an excessive preoccupation with sexual matters and inappropriate knowledge of adult sexual behaviour for their age, or regularly engages in sexual play inappropriate for their age
- Sexual activity through words, play or drawing
- Repeated urinary infections or unexplained stomach pains
- The child is sexually provocative or seductive with adults
- Inappropriate bed-sharing arrangements at home
- Severe sleep disturbances with fears, phobias, vivid dreams or nightmares which sometimes have overt or veiled sexual connotations
- Eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia

Signs of emotional abuse

- Depression, aggression, extreme anxiety, changes or regression in mood or behaviour, particularly where a child withdraws or becomes clingy
- Obsessions or phobias
- Sudden underachievement or lack of concentration
- Seeking adult attention and not mixing well with other children
- Sleep or speech disorders
- Negative statements about self
- Highly aggressive or cruel to others
- Extreme shyness or passivity
- Running away, stealing and lying

Signs of possible neglect

- Dirty skin, body smells, unwashed, uncombed hair and untreated lice
- Clothing that is dirty, too big or small, or inappropriate for the weather conditions
- Frequently left unsupervised or alone
- Frequent diarrhoea
- Frequent tiredness
- Untreated illnesses, infected cuts or physical complaints which the carer does not respond to
- Frequently hungry
- Overeating junk food

What are the possible effects of abuse?

The sustained physical, emotional, sexual abuse or neglect of children can have major long-term effects on all aspects of their health, development and wellbeing. They can grow up to feel worthless, unlovable, betrayed, powerless, confused, frightened and mistrustful of others. They might feel, wrongly, that the abuse is their fault.

- Children have a right to be safe.
- Children are not to blame for being abused.
- Children should not feel they have to deal with abuse on their own.
- Children should tell someone they trust if they are being abused in any way.

Possible effects of physical abuse

Physical abuse can lead directly to neurological damage, physical injuries, disability and in extreme cases death. Physical abuse has been linked to aggressive behaviour in children, emotional and behavioural problems, and educational difficulties.

Possible effects of emotional abuse

If a child suffers sustained emotional abuse there is increasing evidence of adverse long-term effects on their development. Emotional abuse has a significant impact on a developing child's mental health, behaviour and self-esteem. It can be especially damaging in infancy and can be as important as the other more visible forms of abuse in terms of its impact on the child. Domestic violence, adult mental health problems and parental substance misuse may be features in families where children are exposed to such abuse.

Possible effects of sexual abuse

Disturbed behaviour including self-harm, inappropriate sexual behaviour, sadness, depression and a loss of self-esteem have all been linked to sexual abuse. Its adverse effects may last long into adult life. The severity of the impact on the child is believed to increase the longer the abuse continues, the more serious the abuse, the younger the child at the start, and the closeness of the relationship to the abuser. The child's ability to cope with the experience of sexual abuse, once recognised, is strengthened by the support of a non-abusive adult carer who believes the child, helps the child understand the abuse, and is able to offer help and protection. Some adults who sexually abuse children have themselves been sexually abused as children. As children they may also have been exposed to domestic violence and lack of adequate care. However, it would be quite wrong to suggest that most children who are abused will inevitably go on to become abusers themselves.

Possible effects of neglect

Severe neglect of young children can seriously impair growth and intellectual development. Persistent neglect can seriously impair health and development and cause long-term difficulties with social functioning, relationships and educational progress. Extreme cases of neglect can cause death.

Reporting the abuse

I think a child is being abused –what can I do?

Ring numbers below

If you are concerned about an adult?

You can ring these numbers and they will be able to direct you to the service required.

You are NOT qualified to try to sort the concern/problem on your own

If you are concerned that a child living in Calderdale is being abused you should call and speak to someone at one of the following numbers:

MAST (Multi Agency Screening Team) 01422288000

NSPCC Helpline **0808 800 5000** (24 hours)

For further information or advice please contact Children and Young People Service, Child Protection and Review Unit:

Child Protection and Review Unit

Knowle Park House

Crowlees Road

Mirfield

WF14 9PR

Telephone: **01924 483749**

Fax: **01924 483747**