

WHEN HOME LIFE IS HARD: UNDERSTANDING ABUSE

Child abuse is when someone caring for a child intentionally hurts them physically or emotionally. It can be hard to recognize this abuse – it's natural to trust that the people who are supposed to care for you wouldn't hurt you. But your feelings are important, and if you feel scared or unsafe at home, you might be experiencing some form of abuse.

AM I BEING ABUSED?

Experiencing abuse is scary and confusing, especially when it's coming from someone who is supposed to take care of you. Even if you know you are being hurt, you may have thoughts like: *I know they love me. I don't want to get them in trouble. What if it's not on purpose? What if I did something wrong? What if they told me not to tell anyone?* No matter what, abuse is never your fault, and you deserve to feel safe around the people in your life.

It's also important to know that something considered abuse in one culture may not be considered abuse in another. This doesn't mean that the actions don't hurt you – as the one experiencing the situation, you are the only person who can decide if you are hurt. But sometimes, what looks like intentional abuse or neglect may be a cultural misunderstanding or a traditional practice. In cases like this, education and support can help families change their behavior.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK I'M BEING ABUSED?

The safest thing you can do if you're being hurt (or are scared you will be hurt) by someone in your life is to talk to an adult. You have a few options on who to go to:

An adult you know and trust. You can tell a family member, teacher, coach, friend's parent, neighbor, or any other adult in your life who you feel safe around about what you are experiencing.

Some of these adults may be mandated reporters – people who are required by law to report suspected abuse or neglect. These adults are really important in keeping kids safe, but you might not be ready for someone to intervene yet. Mandated reporters vary by state but often include teachers, school staff, and other adults who work with children.

The Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-4-A-CHILD). You can call (or text or chat) this hotline 24/7 to reach a professional crisis counselor. They will listen to you, help you decide what to do, and can connect you with support services. All calls, texts, and chats are confidential.

The police. If you are in immediate and serious danger, you should call 911. They will respond and intervene immediately.

WHAT IF I'M NOT READY TO TALK YET?

That's okay. Sometimes kids feel guilty speaking up, like they are betraying their parents or caregivers, or are scared about what will end up happening to them. It takes a lot of courage to talk about abuse, and it's okay if you aren't prepared for that yet. Focus on keeping yourself safe in the meantime: find a safe space in your home or at a friend's house, limit interaction by having headphones on or focusing on a book, and have a plan in case you ever need to get out of the house immediately.

You deserve to feel safe and loved. When you are ready, know that telling someone is the safest and bravest thing you can do, and there are a lot of adults who care about you and will help keep you safe.

TYPES OF ABUSE

PHYSICAL ABUSE

Any intentional physical harm to a child is physical abuse, including hitting, burning, biting, or any action that injures the child.

SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual abuse occurs when a child is involved in sexual acts with an adult or older child. These acts do not need to involve physical contact to be considered abuse. No adult should touch or talk about your body (or theirs, or anyone else's) in a way that makes you uncomfortable.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Words can hurt. When a parent or caregiver talks to or treats you in a way that makes you feel bad about yourself, that's emotional abuse. It can be hard to recognize but includes things like name-calling, insulting, threatening violence, and withholding love and support.

NEGLECT

Sometimes, the people who are supposed to take care of you don't meet your needs. This may not be intentional – the adults in your life might care about you very much but be struggling financially or with their own mental health, making it difficult to provide for you. Even if they are doing their best, it is their responsibility to provide food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and supervision to maintain your health and well-being.

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV)

Some adults treat their child(ren) well but are abusive to other adults at home. You can be impacted by abuse even if it isn't happening to you. Witnessing abuse, especially involving someone you love, or just being in a home where you know (or suspect) that abuse is happening can weigh on your mental health.

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