

What you  
need to  
know if a  
child is  
being abused  
or neglected...

Information  
for clergy,  
lay leaders and  
volunteers in  
churches and  
synagogues.

**Q How is child abuse defined?**

**A** Child abuse refers to an act committed by a parent, caregiver or person in a position of trust (even though he/she may not care for the child on a daily basis) which is not accidental and which harms or threatens to harm a child's physical or mental health or a child's welfare.

**Q What are the four basic types of child abuse?**

**A** **Physical abuse** occurs when an adult injures a child and it is not an accident. It can include:

- Assault
- Shaking or slapping
- Burning or scalding
- Kicking
- Strangling

**Neglect** is any maltreatment or negligence that harms a child's health, welfare or safety. It can include physical, emotional, or educational neglect through such actions as:

- Abandonment
- Refusal to seek treatment for illness
- Inadequate supervision
- Health hazards in the home
- Ignoring child's need for contact, affirmation and stimulation
- Providing inadequate emotional nurturance

- Knowingly permitting chronic truancy
- Keeping a child home from school repeatedly without cause
- Failing to enroll a child in school

**Emotional abuse** deeply affects a child's self-esteem by submitting him/her to verbal assault or emotional cruelty. It does not always involve injuries one can see.

It can include:

- Close confinement, such as being shut in a closet
- Inadequate nurturance
- Extreme discipline
- Knowingly permitting such behavior as drug or alcohol abuse

**Sexual abuse** involves sexual contact between a child or teenager and an adult or significantly older, more powerful person. Children are not developmentally capable of understanding or resisting sexual contact and may be psychologically and socially dependent upon the offender.

In addition to sexual contact, abuse can include other exploitive behaviors such as inappropriate verbal stimulation of a child or teenager, taking or showing sexually explicit photographs of or to a child or teenager, or exposing a child or teenager to pornography or adult sexual activity.

**Q What are some possible indicators of child abuse or neglect?**

**A** Possible indicators of abuse are listed below, but do not necessarily constitute proof that a child is being abused. They should serve as warning signs to look further, ask questions or seek assistance in determining whether or not a child needs help. Trust your instincts if you think a family or individual is in trouble.

Clergy and other ministers are in a key position with families to sense when something is wrong and to speak honestly.

Some of the possible indicators of child abuse and neglect are:

- Self-destructive and destructive behavior
- Fractures, lacerations, bruises that cannot be explained or explanations which are improbable given a child's developmental stage
- Failure to thrive
- Depression, passivity
- Hyperactive/disruptive behavior
- Sexualized behavior or precocious knowledge of explicit sexual behavior, pseudo-maturity

- Running away, truancy
- Alcohol or drug abuse, other self-destructive behavior, e.g., eating disorders.

**Q How widespread are child abuse and neglect?**

**A** There are more than 3.5 million reported cases of physical abuse or neglect and an estimated 1,750 children die of child abuse and/or neglect in the United States each year (US Dept. of Health & Human Services, Children's Bureau, 2016). Canadian authorities estimate that the incidence of child abuse and neglect in Canada parallels that of the United States.

The prevalence of child abuse is difficult to determine because the incidence is far greater than what is reported to authorities. About 1 in 7 children experiences abuse and/or neglect each year (CDC, 2017).

Studies show that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused before the age of 18 (CDC, 2006). This equates to more than 42 million adult survivors of child sexual abuse in the United States.

73% of child victims do not tell anyone about the abuse for at least a year. 45% of victims do not tell anyone for at least 5 years. Some never disclose (Smith et al., 2000; Broman-Fulks et al., 2007).

More than 95% of child sexual abuse victims know their perpetrator in some way. Most sexual abuse occurs within the family. (HHS, 2016).

Offenders come from all economic, ethnic, racial, and educational backgrounds and religious traditions. They may be respected members of the community, church or synagogue.

Counseling programs in religious communities confirm that cases of child abuse among their clients and the numbers of cases where the offender is known to the victim conform closely to those reflected in national research.

**Q What should you do if you suspect child abuse?**

**A** The goals of any effective response to suspected abuse are:

- To protect the child from further abuse;
- To stop the offender's abuse; and
- To allow the victim to heal and, if possible, restore the family or, if not possible, to mourn the loss of family relationships.

Anyone may report suspected child abuse and will not be liable for an unfounded report if it is made in good faith.

In every state and province, persons in helping professions –teachers, doctors, counselors, police officers, social workers, health professionals – are legally mandated to report a suspicion of child abuse or neglect to child abuse authorities.

In some states in the U.S., ordained ministers, priests,

and rabbis are exempt from this statutory requirement.

People serving in a pastoral role, however, are **strongly** encouraged to report suspected child abuse regardless of statutory requirements. In Canada, most provinces require clergy to report. In fact, some denominations in Canada require their clergy to report regardless of civil mandates.

Learn the specifics of the law by calling the state or provincial attorney general's office.

Religious leaders should not attempt to gather detailed evidence from the person who discloses. The children's protective services agency will investigate and determine the level of risk to the child.

*If you suspect abuse, call the children's protective services agency in your state or province to discuss your concerns or to make a formal report regarding your fear about the welfare of a child or teenager.*

In the U.S., you can call the national child abuse hotline at 800-4-A-Child (800-422-4453) to be connected to local, state, and national resources.

**Q What if you receive information in confidence that causes you to suspect child abuse?**

**A** It is generally expected that personal matters divulged to clergy are held in confidence, but a moral obligation to report exists when there is the possibility of harm to a child.

Information can usually be held in confidence unless it leads one to believe that someone is being hurt or abused, is in danger of injury, or the offender presents a risk to other children. Confidentiality means holding information in trust and sharing it only if someone is being harmed and needs help.

In some traditions, the sanctity of the confessional must be maintained, but there are pastoral resources that can be brought to bear to protect a child or teenager.

Reporting may result in effective intervention for the abuser in addition to helping the victim. The behavior of offenders may escalate over time if it is not stopped. Abusers need psychological treatment along with spiritual guidance. Repentance, conversion, prayer and spiritual counsel can help the abuser, but outside intervention must also occur in order to hold the perpetrator accountable for his/her actions.

**Q What can you do to make your religious institution a safe place for members to seek and find help?**

**A** The leadership of churches and synagogues can confront the problem of child abuse in several ways:

- Break the silence by speaking openly about the existence of abuse and preaching about exploitation and violence
- Ask a community-based child abuse specialist to speak to the congregation
- Offer prevention education programs for children in Sunday and Sabbath schools
- Develop a foster home recruitment program sponsored by the church or synagogue
- Provide parenting classes, support groups and respite care for parents under pressure
- Organize support groups for survivors of abuse
- Operate "latch-key" programs for children
- Designate a day or month for educating and activating the congregation. April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month in the United States.

*Religious leaders, both lay and clergy, who make it known that they are aware of the nature and extent of child abuse are more readily approached by victims, other family members, and, at times, even the perpetrators of child abuse.*

**Q Where can you find more information on the subject?**

**A** The following organizations can provide you with more information:

**Childhelp USA**  
www.childhelp.org  
800-4-A-CHILD

**Prevent Child Abuse America**  
www.preventchildabuse.org  
800-CHILDREN

For more information on religious issues and child abuse:

**FaithTrust Institute**  
www.faithtrustinstitute.org  
206-634-1903

***"I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live ..."***

*Deuteronomy 30:19, RSV*