

Child Physical Abuse Fact Sheet



What is physical abuse?

The precise definition of child physical abuse varies among states, the District of Columbia, and the US territories. All these entities agree that physical abuse occurs when a parent or caregiver commits an act that results in physical injury to a child or adolescent, such as red marks, cuts, welts, bruises, muscle sprains, or broken bones, even if the injury was unintentional. Physical abuse can occur when physical punishment goes too far or a parent lashes out in anger.

Even forms of physical punishment that do not result in physical injury are considered physical abuse and are outlawed in some states. For example, in Arkansas, Minnesota, and the District of Columbia, hitting a child with a closed fist is considered physical abuse. In Arkansas, hitting a child on the face or head is also called physical abuse.¹ (For more information on state laws, go to www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/defineall.pdf.)

Physical Abuse Myths and Facts

Myth: Child physical abuse is rare.

Fact: In 2007, there were approximately 149,000 cases of child physical abuse reported in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Actual rates of child physical abuse are probably higher, since not every case is reported.²

Who is physically abused?

Children of all ages, races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds are at risk for physical abuse. Physical abuse affects both boys and girls across neighborhoods, communities, and countries around the world. Children ages 4–7 and 12–15 are at the greatest risk of being physically abused. Very young children are most susceptible to receiving serious injuries.²

How can you tell if a child is being (or has been) physically abused?

It can be difficult to determine from a child's behavior or emotional state whether abuse has occurred. The best way to know if a child has been abused is if the child tells you.

There may also be physical signs, such as welts and bruises in various stages of healing, fingernail marks, human bite marks, burns, lacerations, abrasions in the pattern of an instrument, and missing, loose, or broken teeth. It is very possible for a child to be physically abused without anyone noticing if the child's injuries are hidden by clothing.

There are several indicators that strongly suggest a child is being abused:

- Frequent physical injuries that are attributed to the child's being clumsy or accident-prone
- Injuries that do not seem to fit the explanation given by the parents or child
- Conflicting explanations provided by child and/or caregivers, explanations that do not fit the injuries, or injuries attributed to accidents that could not have occurred given the child's age (for example, an immersion burn on a child too young to walk or crawl)
- Habitual absence from or lateness to school without a credible reason. Parents may keep a child at home until physical evidence of abuse has healed. One should also be suspicious if a child comes to school wearing long-sleeved or high-collared clothing on hot days, since this may be an attempt to hide injuries
- Awkward movements or difficulty walking; this may suggest that the child is in pain or suffers from the aftereffects of repeated injuries

Physical Abuse Myths and Facts

Myth: It's only physical abuse if you mean to hurt your child.

Fact: Even accidental injuries of a child are considered physical abuse if the act that injured the child was done intentionally as a form of punishment.

What should you do if you suspect a child is being (or has been) physically abused?

If you are a counselor, parent, teacher, or anyone else concerned about a child whom you suspect is being abused, the best way to begin is by talking to the child.

- Start with open-ended questions. Don't assume that the child is being abused. There may be many explanations for why a child is behaving in a particular way or for how a child was injured. Some children have conditions, such as osteogenesis imperfecta or blood clotting disorders, that make them more vulnerable to bruising and/or broken bones.
- If the child has a visible injury, ask how the child was injured. Ask open-ended follow-up questions to look for inconsistencies if the explanation for the injury seems implausible or doesn't match the injuries.

Physical Abuse Myths and Facts

Myth: Good parents don't get frustrated or angry with their children's behavior.

Fact: All parents get angry at their children sometimes. It is okay to be angry, but it is not okay to hurt your children in anger. Angry feelings cannot get you into trouble but violent behavior can. It is important for parents to learn how to express and control their anger so that their children learn to do the same.

What can you do if a child discloses physical abuse?

Whether or not you are mandated to report child abuse to the child protection agency varies from state to state. In New Jersey, for example, every citizen who comes into contact with a child and observes behavior or conditions that might indicate abuse or neglect is required by law to report their suspicions. Even if you are not mandated to report abuse, there is no law against making an abuse report if you have a reasonable suspicion that a child is being abused. The identity of the person making the child abuse report is not shared with anyone other than child protection services workers. Some states also allow anonymous reporting.

If you know or suspect a child is being or has been physically abused, please call the ChildHelp-National Child Abuse Hotline at [1-800-4-A-Child \(1-800-422-4453\)](tel:1-800-4-A-Child) or go to <http://www.childhelp.org/get-help>.

If you need immediate assistance, call 911.

Why don't children tell about physical abuse?

There are many reasons why children don't tell about physical abuse, including:

- Fear that their parents will be mad at them or will hurt them worse for telling
- Desire not to get their parents into trouble
- Fear of being removed from their homes
- A belief that it's okay for their parents to hurt them
- Fear of not being believed
- Shame or guilt
- Belief that they deserve the abuse for their "bad" behavior

What are the consequences of physical abuse for families?

Children

Experts in the field of child behavior believe that physical abuse teaches children to be submissive, fearful, and/or aggressive.³ It also teaches them that hitting is a way to control other people or solve problems. The attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that grow out of physical abuse can cause a child to have problems at school, at home, and with friends.⁴ Sometimes children who have been hit don't do well at making and keeping friends. They may not trust people in authority. Children may also become fearful of their parents. It can be confusing for children when a parent, the person they depend on and love the most, hurts them in some way.

Physical Abuse Myths and Facts

Myth: Physical punishment helps parents control their child's behavior.

Fact: Parents who use excessive punishment are not in control. Physical punishment does not teach children how to make good decisions, how to determine what is right and wrong, or how to control their own behavior. Instead, physical punishment makes children submissive, fearful, and/or aggressive. It also teaches them that hitting is a way to solve problems with other people.³

Being hit may make children feel angry, helpless, powerless, hostile, guilty, or ashamed. It may result in their becoming chronically anxious or depressed. All these negative feelings about themselves increase children's stress levels and only make it harder for them to behave well. With therapy and support, children can overcome the effects of child physical abuse and go on to lead productive lives.

Parents

When children's behaviors get worse in response to being hit, parents may feel even more stress. When physical punishment does not create the results a parent seeks, the parent may escalate the punishment, and the child and parent may get locked in a vicious cycle of greater violence on the part of parents, and greater acting out on the part of the children. Many parents feel upset after hitting their children. They may also feel bad about themselves and their abilities to parent. Once the state's child protection services agency becomes involved, parents may be arrested, may have to go to court, and may have their children removed from their care. There are alternatives to physical punishment. Don't hesitate to contact a therapist in your area to assist you.

Physical Abuse Myths and Facts

Myth: Parents who physically abuse their children are bad and unloving people.

Fact: Most parents love their children and do not mean to hurt them. They discipline their children because they want them to behave well. Many parents feel frustrated with their children's behavior and do not know any other way to discipline them, but are open to learning effective parenting strategies to reduce the risk of physical abuse in the future.

References

1. Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2007). *Definitions of child abuse and neglect: Summary of state laws*. Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. Available at http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/defineall.pdf
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Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.

Suggested Citation: National Child Traumatic Stress, Network, Physical Abuse Collaborative Group. (2009). *Child physical abuse fact sheet*. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.