Factors Negatively Affecting Family Life

Understanding is the first step toward helping families. Therefore, it is important for people to have some idea of the reasons for the occurrence of child abuse and neglect. However, because there is no simple "cause," there can be no simple "cure." We do know that certain factors have a powerful effect on family life. If these influences are negative, they can cause severe parental stress, lead to lack of control and result in child maltreatment.

The factors affecting families are:

- violence in our society in general;
- community attitude regarding family violence;
- financial crises, poor housing, unemployment, poverty; inadequate social integration, poor family relationships and isolation;
- general stress levels;
- for the parent or caregiver, emotional immaturity, low frustration tolerance leading to aggression, rigid thought and behavior patterns, history of emotional deprivation as a child and negative past family life history;
- lack of parenting skills;
- alcohol and chemical abuse.

The factors listed above can impact all families. Researchers consistently document that child maltreatment can occur in all communities — urban, suburban and rural; affluent and low-income; Anglo and communities of color; religious and nonbelievers.

Report Suspected Abuse or Neglect

To report suspected abuse or neglect, call the department of social services in the area in which the child lives or where the alleged abuse occurred. Ask for child protective services. If you feel that the child is in immediate and severe physical danger, call child protective services and/or local law enforcement immediately.

If you have questions about reporting child abuse or neglect, call: Virginia Department of Social Services Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline: 1-800-552-7096 (Voice/TTY)

Prevent Child Abuse Virginia

1-800-CHILDREN
4901 Fitzhugh Avenue Suite 200
Richmond, Virginia 23230
Phone: 804·359·6166
Fax: 804·359·5065

Fairfax County Department of Family Services
BLUE RIBBON Campaign ...Keeping Kids Safe

Child Protective Services Hotline
703-324-7400; TTY 703-222-9452
www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dfs

Recognizing Child Abuse

One of the first steps in helping abused or neglected children is learning to recognize the symptoms of child maltreatment.

While no single symptom alone proves that child maltreatment is present in a family, when symptoms appear repeatedly or in combination, they should cause us to take a closer look at the situation and to consider the possibility of child abuse or neglect.

Recognizing Child Maltreatment

Signs of Physical Abuse

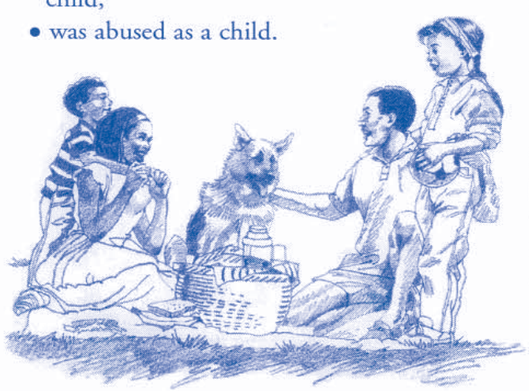
Physical abuse is any non-accidental physical injury or threat of injury to a child by a parent or caretaker. Physical abuse includes cuts, fractures, bruises, shaking, burns and internal injuries.

Consider the possibility of physical abuse when the child:

- has questionable burns, bites, bruises, broken bones or black eyes;
- has fading bruises or other marks noticeable after an absence from school or day care;
- seems frightened of the parents and protests or cries when it is time to go home from school or day care;
- shrinks at the approach of adults; explains an injury in a way that is not believable, based on the type of injury.

Consider the possibility of physical abuse when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- offers a conflicting or unconvincing explanation for the child's injury or refuses to explain an injury;
- describes the child as "bad," "stupid," "different" or speaks of the child in some other very negative way;
- uses harsh physical discipline with the child;
- was abused as a child.



Signs of Physical Neglect

Physical neglect is failure to provide children with the adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical or dental care and supervision that they need to be healthy and safe. Physical neglect also includes abandonment and expulsion from home or not allowing a runaway to return home. It is important to distinguish between willful neglect and a parent's or caretaker's failure to provide the necessities of life because of poverty or cultural norms. A combination or pattern of physical indicators, child behavioral characteristics and caretaker characteristi indicates the possibility of physical neglect.

Consider the possibility of physical neglect when the child:

- is frequently absent from school;
- begs or steals food or money from classmates;
- lacks needed medical or dental care, immunizations or glasses;
- is consistently dirty and has a severe body odor;
- lacks proper clothing for the weather;
- abuses drugs and/or alcohol;
- states that there is no one home to provide care;
- engages in delinquent acts such as vandalism or theft.

Consider the possibility of physical neglect when the paren or other adult caregiver:

- appears to be indifferent to the child;
- seems apathetic or depressed;
- consistently fails to keep appointments;
- is abusing alcohol or drugs.

Recognizing Child Maltreatment

Signs of Mental Abuse or Neglect

Mental abuse is a chronic pattern of behaviors, such as belittling, humiliating and ridiculing a child. Mental neglect is the consistent failure of a parent or caregiver to provide a child with appropriate support, attention and affection.

Consider the possibility of mental maltreatment when the child:

- has habit disorders, such as biting, head banging, bedwetting or eating disorders;
- shows extremes in behavior, may be overly compliant or demanding or may be extremely passive or aggressive;
- is either inappropriately adult (e.g. parenting other children) or inappropriately infantile (e.g. frequent rocking or head banging);
- is delayed in physical or emotional development;
- is self-destructive;
- has sleep disorders, such as nightmares or fear of going to sleep;
- has hypochondria, hysteria, obsessions or phobias.

Consider the possibility of mental maltreatment when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- constantly blames, belittles or berates the child;
- is unconcerned about the child and refuses to consider offers of help for the child's school problems;
- overtly rejects the child;
- treats siblings unequally;
- has unreasonable demands or impossible expectations without regard to the child's developmental capacity.

Signs of Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is defined as acts of sexual assault and sexual exploitation of minors by parents or other caretakers. It includes a broad range of behavior and may consist of a single incident or many incidents over a long period of time. Because sexual abuse usually does not involve a violent attack, there may be little or no physical evidence that abuse has occurred.

Consider the possibility of sexual abuse when the child:

- has difficulty walking or sitting;
- suddenly refuses to change for gym or to participate in physical activities;
- demonstrates bizarre, sophisticated or unusual sexual knowledge or behavior;
- becomes pregnant or contracts a venereal disease, particularly if under age fourteen;
- runs away;
- reports sexual abuse by a parent or other adult caregiver;
- exhibits withdrawal, chronic depression or infantile behavior, has poor peer relationships;
- abuses drugs and/or alcohol;
- experiences a drop in academic performance;
- has unexplained money or gifts.

Consider the possibility of sexual abuse when the parent or other adult caregiver, in conjunction with the above, also:

- is unduly protective of the child and/or severely limits the child's contact with other children, especially those of the opposite sex;
- describes marital difficulties involving family power struggles or sexual relations;
- abuses drugs and/or alcohol;
- lacks social and emotional contacts outside the family;
- was sexually abused as a child.