

**Excerpt from “An Interagency Guide, WORKING TOGETHER to keep children and young people safe. Child Youth and Family (0508 326 459)**

Every situation is different, so it’s important to consider the whole child’s life and environment. Sometimes these signs could be the result of life events, such as divorce, accidental injury, the arrival of a new sibling and so on. If ever you are concerned though, ask yourself the following questions:

- ***What is going on in the family or child’s life that could be affecting them?***

Is the child’s behaviour a sign of abuse, or are there other things going on in the family?

- ***How is the child’s behaviour?***

Children can’t easily describe what they are feeling, so their emotions often come out in their behaviour. If a child seems unusually difficult or withdrawn, aggressive or anxious, this may be a sign something is not right at home.

- ***How is the child’s development?***

If a child is suffering from abuse or neglect, this may affect their development in a number of areas. This should be assessed by professionals whether it is abuse or not, so they can get the right help.

- ***Has the child or family hinted at, or said that something is wrong?***

The child may be looking for ways to tell you that something is wrong, so listen carefully and take what they say seriously.

- ***Are there signs of family violence?***

People experiencing family violence may seem fearful or nervous, lack in confidence, and feel sad or angry a lot. Children need to be protected from family violence, so need the help of adults around them.

- ***Do I sense the family is struggling, or the child is at risk in some way?***

You might have a feeling that things aren’t right, but there are no actual signs of abuse, and you can’t quite put your finger on the problem. If you’re worried, talk to someone. Maybe talking with the family will put your mind at rest, or give you a steer on what’s happening. Or you could talk with colleagues or others working with the family.

If you see something that concerns you, give us a call. We’ll be happy to talk it through with you.

## **The types of child maltreatment and spotting the signs**

This section gives you information about the different types of abuse, and the warning signs associated with them. It is an overview to help you understand what to look out for, but for more detailed descriptions check out the appendix section at the back of this book.

## Neglect

Neglect is the most common form of abuse, and although the effects may not be as obvious as physical abuse, they are just as serious, leading to damaged self-esteem and a lost opportunity to thrive in the world.

It can consist of:

- **Physical neglect** – not providing the necessities of life like a warm place, enough food and clothing.
- **Neglectful supervision** – leaving children home alone, or without someone safe looking after them during the day or night.
- **Emotional neglect** – not giving children the comfort, attention and love they need through play, talk, and everyday affection.
- **Medical neglect** – the failure to take care of their health needs.
- **Educational neglect** – allowing chronic truancy, failure to enrol children in school, or inattention to special education needs.

Children who are being neglected may show a combination of behavioural and physical signs. Like every type of abuse, look for an overall pattern which tells you something's just not right for this child, and think about what you can do to help.

- **Looking rough and uncared for** – kids might be extremely dirty and not have the right clothes to keep warm and dry. Neglected children may also be underweight or small for their age because they're not getting enough, or the right sort of food.
- **Persistent nappy rash or skin disorders** – can be an indication that children aren't being well cared for.
- **Out and about unsupervised** – if the child is left alone, or doesn't have a safe home to go to they might spend lots of time at the neighbours', steal food, or regularly hang out at school or on the streets. Neglected and abused kids are at greater risk of drug and alcohol abuse, and can drift onto a dangerous pathway to offending.
- **Falling behind in their school work and attendance** – sometimes coupled with poor speech and social skills, or other developmental delays is a sign that kids are not getting the support and nurturing that they need.

These signs could also point to other things going on in the child's life. Don't assume, but do care enough to offer help. Look at the child's whole life.

- **Indiscriminate attachment to adults** – strong attention and affection seeking, or a severe lack of attachment to their own parents can be a sign of neglect.

### Is it neglect?

The signs are not as immediate or obvious, but it's just as harmful. However, keep in mind that these signs may also be the result of other family circumstances. If you are concerned about a child, offer

your help, put the family in touch with organisations that can help, or talk to Child, Youth and Family.

## Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse is a pattern of behaviour where the child is rejected and put down. They may be isolated, constantly degraded and criticised, or negatively compared to others.

As emotional abuse is a component of all abuse and neglect, the signs are often encompassed in the other abuse types. You may often see the same indicators as you would for neglect, along with other signs that are particular to emotional abuse.

The effects of emotional abuse may only become evident as the child gets older and begins to show difficult or disturbing behaviours.

A child who is emotionally abused may show the following signs in addition to what you'd expect to see from neglect:

- **Sleep problems like bed-wetting or soiling** – with no medical cause, nightmares and poor sleeping patterns.
- **Frequent physical complaints** – real or imagined such as headaches, nausea and vomiting, and abdominal pains. This might coincide with the child being very underweight or dehydrated.
- **Signs of anxiety** – including poor self-esteem, being unable to cope in social settings and sometimes obsessive behaviour. Children who are abused are very sad and alone, and might talk about hurting themselves or ending their lives.

## Physical abuse

Physical abuse is any behaviour which results in physical harm to a child. If you're worried about a child being physically abused, the signs to look out for are:

- **Unexplained bruises, welts, cuts and abrasions** – particularly in unusual places like the face, on their back or tummy, buttocks, or the backs of their legs. Also look out for the regularity of these injuries to see if there is a pattern forming.
- **Unexplained fractures or dislocations** – many kids are active resulting in bumps and breaks, but people need to be thinking about how and why these injuries happen. Especially worrying are fractures to the head or face, and hip or shoulder dislocations. Be very concerned if this is happening in young babies, who are less active and not moving around enough to accidentally hurt themselves.
- **Burn marks** – anywhere on the body are concerning, and if not easily explained need to be notified. Be mindful of burns in the shape of an object like a stove ring or iron, cigarette marks or rope burn.
- **The child or their parent** – can't recall how the injuries occurred – or their explanations change or don't make sense.

## Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is any act where an adult or a more powerful person uses a child or young person for a sexual purpose. This may be consensual or not, and can happen within or outside the family. Most sexual abuse is done by someone the child knows and trusts.

Sexual abuse may include physical sexual acts, or could be things like exposure to pornographic material and internet sites, or sexual conversations. It often begins with some form of grooming, which is when the person prepares the child for sexual contact by lowering their inhibitions and gaining their trust.

Encourage children to talk to you or another trusted adult if they feel bad or uncomfortable about any relationships – whether a friendship, a relationship with an adult, or an online interaction.

### **Encourage children to speak up.**

As adults, we consider sexual experiences to be very private and we don't usually talk about them openly. It's useful to think about how private and extremely difficult it must be for a child to talk about these – especially if they are feeling confused, or are being threatened by the adult.

Children may not know what to say and use different words to express what is going on. Let them know that if they don't like an adult or online friend, the right thing to do is talk to you... and remember you can call us with any concerns.

One of the best things you can do is make it safe for children to speak up.

Encourage children to tell you if they feel uncomfortable with an adult. By spotting the signs early, we can help protect our children from harm. Let children know it's ok to speak up.

The following signs are an indication that a child may be being sexually abused, so talk to Child, Youth and Family or the Police straight away if you notice:

- Physical indicators – like unusual or excessive itching, bruising, lacerations, redness, swelling or bleeding in the genital or anal area, and urinary tract infections. Also be concerned and ask questions if there is ever blood in a child's urine or faeces, it's painful for them to go to the toilet, or if a child or young girl is showing signs of being sexually active. When pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease is identified, abuse must always be considered, especially in girls under 16 years.
- Age inappropriate sexual play or interest – and other unusual behaviour like sexually explicit drawings, descriptions and talk about sex can indicate this type of abuse.
- Fear of a certain person or place – children might be trying to express their fear without saying exactly what they are frightened of, so listen carefully, and take what they say seriously.

Some children may purposefully try to make themselves unattractive, or try to feel clean through obsessive washing.

### **Looking out for our children**

The things to look out for in children will vary, and might not be specific to one particular type of abuse. If they are being maltreated, kids will show a range of signs that tell you they are sad, frightened, and not being cared for in a way that all children deserve.

Your job is to look at the child's whole life, their behaviour, how they're doing at school and with friends, and are there any particularly worrying signs that need a closer look.

If you're not sure, talk to us or a service in the community who might know the family, and know the best way to help.

As well as the things we've talked about, keep a careful eye out for:

- eating disorders and substance abuse
- kids who are disengaged or needy of adult attention and acceptance
- very aggressive behaviour towards toys, people or pets – they may be acting out what’s happening to them
- children who don’t want to go home or be with certain people
- feelings of low self-worth and loneliness.

Maybe talking with the family will put your mind at rest, or give you a steer on what’s happening. Or you could talk with colleagues or others working with the family. If you see something that concerns you, give us a call. We’ll be happy to talk it through with you.

<https://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Support-for-families/Support-programmes/Working-together-seminars/Working-together-guide-2020.pdf>