

Definitions of abuse: children

Physical abuse

The physical abuse of children is defined as the intentional and non-accidental use of physical force and violence that results in injury. Physical abuse includes throwing, hitting, shaking, hurting, poisoning, suffocating, burning or scalding. It also includes giving alcohol, inappropriate drugs or poison to children, the failure to prevent physical injury, or the imposing of harmful cultural practice such as female mutilation.

Factitious illness

This was previously known as Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy. Factitious illness is when an adult, usually a primary carer, seeks medical opinion about physical or psychological symptoms in a child that is not actually sick. They try to deceive medical professionals that the child is ill. This is often linked with physical abuse and sometimes with poisoning to make the child ill.

Shaken impact syndrome

Shaken impact syndrome describes injuries that are caused by shaking. Very young children, particularly babies under the age of one, are the most vulnerable. This is because their neck muscles are too weak to support their heavy heads. The brain and surrounding blood vessels are very fragile. Shaking of very young children causes the brain to move inside the skull, which means that the blood vessels can burst and bleed into the skull.

Domestic violence

Domestic violence takes place in the home. The abuse is mainly physical and can be a way of controlling and dominating relationships. Children are often victims, as are partners of the perpetrator. Domestic violence is usually prolonged and can also include emotional abuse, verbal abuse and the witnessing of physical violence.

Emotional abuse

There is a level of emotional abuse involved in all types of abuse. However, emotional abuse may also occur independently of the other types of abuse. It is defined as the persistent emotionally cruel treatment of a child so as to hinder the child's emotional development and mental health. Children who are exposed to constant criticism, hostility, a lack of warmth and affection, are isolated from their peer group or ignored by family members are suffering from emotional abuse. Children may be rejected by peers and their family or they may be overprotected. Children who have suffered emotional abuse often suffer from a lack of confidence and poor self-esteem. Emotional abuse includes 'bullying' from a number of sources, including phone texting, internet messaging, graffiti, being left out and deliberately getting children into trouble.

Failure to thrive

When a child fails to gain weight or to grow and achieve their expected weight and height, they are considered as failing to thrive. This is caused by the inadequate intake of calories through food and drink. Some children have a physical or medical reason for not developing at a normal rate. When this is not the case, one reason is that they may have a negative relationship with the parent or carer. Failure to thrive is most likely to be identified in younger age groups when children are monitored through health clinics and developmental checks.

Neglect

Neglect is the failure by parents or carers to provide appropriately for the safety, psychological and physical needs of their children. Parents and carers do not always do this intentionally. Some parents may be unwell and not able to care for the child properly, they may put their own needs before the child's or may not be fully aware of the changing needs of children as they develop. Neglect is difficult to diagnose as it often has to occur for a continued period of time before any effects are visible. Neglect is not just defined as the dirty, hungry child, but also includes leaving children alone or abandoning them for long periods of time, emotional neglect, educational neglect when the child's needs for education are not met, the denial of medical care and treatment, and not providing a safe environment. Neglect also includes being left with inappropriate carers, inadequate supervision and substance misuse during pregnancy to the unborn child.

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is the use of children for sexual gratification. This may involve physical contact, including the touching of sex organs or non-contact activities such as looking at pornographic materials including films and photographs. Sexual abuse also includes encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways. It can occur in any age group with both girls and boys and the perpetrators can be men or women. Sexual abuse usually involves either emotional manipulation or force. It can also involve observing inappropriate sexual behaviour, encouraging inappropriate sexual discussion, sexual exploitation, such as child prostitution, and having virtual sex through the internet or face-to-face meetings.

Organised abuse

Organised abuse generally refers to sexual abuse but may also involve physical abuse. There will be a number of perpetrators of the abuse and there may be a number of children being abused by the 'ring' of perpetrators. The 'ring' deliberately plan the abuse and it may refer to a paedophile ring, child prostitution or the involvement of children in the production of pornographic material, including films and photographs.

