

## Child Abuse FAQs

---

How is child abuse defined?

What are the four basic types of child abuse?

What are some possible indicators of child abuse or neglect?

How widespread are child abuse and neglect?

What should you do if you suspect child abuse?

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

What can clergy and religious leaders do to make religious institutions safe places for members to seek and find help?

### How is child abuse defined?

Child abuse refers to an act committed by a parent, caregiver or person in a position of trust that is not accidental and that harms or threatens to harm a child's physical health, mental health or welfare. This includes individuals that may not care for the child on a daily basis.

### What are the basic types of child abuse?

The four basic types of child abuse are physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse and sexual abuse.

- **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 a 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 (or home 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 visible injuries. 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  
Exposing a child or teenager to pornography or adult sexual activity.

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

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, promiscuous behavior
- Alcohol or drug abuse, other self-destructive behavior, e.g., eating disorders

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

There are more than two million reported cases of physical abuse or neglect in the U.S. each year (National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect), a ratio of 30 children out of every 1,000. The

National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse in the United States indicates that approximately 2,000 children per year die of child abuse and/or neglect. Canadian authorities estimate that the incidence of child abuse and neglect in Canada parallels that of the U.S. At least one in three girls (Russell, 1984) and one in seven boys (Finkelhor, 1985) are sexually abused by the time they reach the age of 18.

In the vast majority of cases, sexual abusers are known to their victims. More than half of sexual abuse occurs within the family. Counseling programs in religious communities confirm that cases of child abuse among their clients conform closely to numbers reflected in national research, including the number of cases where the victim knows the offender.

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

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

- Protect the child from further abuse
- Stop the offender's abuse
- Heal the victim's brokenness
- Restore the family, or if not possible, help victims 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 U.S. states, 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, and 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.

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

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

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 escalates over time if it is not stopped. Abusers need psychological treatment along with spiritual

guidance. It is always advisable to invite/encourage a confessing abuser to report him/herself to the authorities in the presence of the pastoral/religious leader. 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.

**What can clergy and religious leaders do to make religious institutions safe places for members to seek and find help?**

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.
- Develop a foster home recruitment program sponsored by the church, synagogue or mosque.
- 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).

Source: <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/resources/learn-the-basics/ca-faqs>

Downloaded October 9, 2018