What is child abuse?

Child abuse is any action by another person – adult or child – that causes significant harm to a child. It can be physical, sexual or emotional, but can just as often be about a lack of love, care and attention. We know that neglect, whatever form it takes, can be just as damaging to a child as physical abuse.

An abused child will often experience more than one type of abuse, as well as other difficulties in their lives. It often happens over a period of time, rather than being a one-off event. And it can increasingly happen online.

We estimate that over half a million children are abused in the UK each year.
Types of child abuse

**Domestic abuse**
Witnessing domestic abuse is child abuse, and teenagers can suffer domestic abuse in their relationships.

**Read more about domestic abuse**

**Sexual abuse**
A child is sexually abused when they are forced or persuaded to take part in sexual activities. This doesn't have to be physical contact, and it can happen online.

**Read more about sexual abuse**

**Neglect**
Neglect is the ongoing failure to meet a child's basic needs. It's dangerous and children can suffer serious and long-term harm.

**Read more about neglected**
Online abuse

Online abuse is any type of abuse that happens on the web, whether through social networks, playing online games or using mobile phones.

Read more about online abuse

Physical abuse

Physical abuse is deliberately hurting a child causing injuries such as bruises, broken bones, burns or cuts.

Read more about physical abuse

Emotional abuse

Children who are emotionally abused suffer emotional maltreatment or neglect. It's sometimes called psychological abuse and can cause children serious harm.

Read more about emotional abuse
Child sexual exploitation is a type of sexual abuse in which children are sexually exploited for money, power or status.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is the partial or total removal of external female genitalia for non-medical reasons.

Bullying can happen anywhere – at school, at home or online (cyberbullying). It’s usually repeated over a long period of time and can hurt a child both physically and emotionally.
Child trafficking

Child trafficking is a type of abuse where children are recruited, moved or transported and then exploited, forced to work or sold. 

Read more about child trafficking

Grooming

Children and young people can be groomed online or in the real world, by a stranger or by someone they know - a family member, friend or professional.

Read more about grooming

Harmful sexual behaviour

Children and young people who develop harmful sexual behaviour harm themselves and others.

Read more about harmful sexual behaviour

Family issues children experience

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Parental mental health
Helping children living with parents with mental health problems.
Read more about parental mental health

Parental substance misuse
Supporting children living with parents who misuse alcohol and drugs.
Read more about parental substance misuse

Separation, divorce and contact
Even though the relationship has ended between the adults, their role as parents has not stopped. Know your rights and make sure children get the right support.
Get advice for parents
Are you worried about a child?

Signs, symptoms and effects of child abuse and neglect

The signs of child abuse aren't always obvious, and a child might not tell anyone what's happening to them. Sometimes children don't understand that what's happening is abuse.

Spot the signs of child abuse
Call the NSPCC helpline

If you're worried about a child, even if you're unsure, contact our professional counsellors 24/7 for help, advice and support.

Call us or email help@nspcc.org.uk.

0808 800 5000

Report a concern
What to do if you suspect abuse

These are the steps you can take to help keep a child safe from abuse and to protect a child if you suspect they've been abused.

Suspect abuse? Find out what to do

Work or volunteer with children and families?

Visit NSPCC Learning for information, resources and training to help you safeguard and protect children and young people across the UK.

Go to NSPCC Learning
EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Helplines

Help for adults concerned about a child
Call us on 0808 800 5000

Help for children and young people
Call Childline on 0800 1111

For donation and fundraising queries
Call us on 020 7825 2505

Links

What we do
Preventing abuse
Donate
Services and resources
NSPCC Shop
Guidance on complaints and complaints policy

Follow us

The NSPCC

Weston House, 42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH.
Leading children's charity, incorporated by Royal Charter

Registered charity number 216401. NSPCC, charity registered in Scotland, charity number SC037717. Jersey registered charity number AJC179.