

Issue At A Glance:

Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention

At least one in seven children are reported to have experienced abuse and neglect in the United States in the past year, though this may be an underestimate due to a lack of reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic. This brief explores the issue of child abuse and neglect and what can be done to prevent it.

Introduction

April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month, recognizing the importance of families and communities that work together to strengthen families and prevent child abuse and neglect.¹ Child abuse and neglect refer to any “act or series of act of commission or omission by a parent or other caregiver that results in harm, potential for harm, or threat to a child” under 18 years of age.^{2,3} They are serious public health issues and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that can have a long-term impact on health, opportunity, and wellbeing.²

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) cite that at least one-in-seven children have experienced abuse and neglect in the past year in the United States, though this figure is likely an underestimate because many cases were unreported during the pinnacle of the COVID-19 pandemic.² Nearly every state in the U.S. experienced some lockdown restrictions to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and most schools transitioned into virtual classrooms, making it difficult for educational personnel to observe suspected maltreatment and submit maltreatment allegations.⁴ Furthermore, it was reported that 1,750 children died of abuse and neglect in the U.S. in 2020.^{2,5} Child abuse and neglect can have a tremendous impact on lifelong health and wellbeing if left untreated, including increased risk of substance abuse, delayed brain development, lower educational attainment, and limited employment opportunities.^{5,6}

This brief explores the issue of child abuse and neglect in the United States and what can be done to help prevent them to protect our vulnerable children.

Common Types of Abuse and Neglect²

- Physical Abuse** The intentional use of physical force that results in physical injury, such as hitting, kicking, shaking, and burning.
- Sexual Abuse** The act of pressuring or forcing a child to engage in sexual acts, including fondling, penetration, and exposing a child to other sexual activities.
- Emotional Abuse** Behaviors that harm a child’s self-worth or emotional wellbeing, such as name-calling, shaming, rejecting, withholding love, and threatening.
- Neglect** The failure to meet a child’s basic physical and emotional needs, such as housing, food, clothing, education, access to medical care, and having feelings validated and appropriately responded to.

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Long-term Health Effects of Child Abuse and Neglect

Aside from the immediate physical injuries children can experience from abuse, a child's reaction to abuse or neglect can have lifelong and even intergenerational effects. Childhood abuse and neglect are linked to physical, psychological, and behavioral consequences that cost not only the affected individual, but also the society at large.⁷

Physical Health Consequences

Child abuse and neglect have been linked to higher risk for a wide range of long-term and/or future health problems, such as heart attack, brain damage, high blood pressure, migraine headaches, and chronic fatigue syndrome.⁷ Furthermore, children who have experienced abuse, neglect, or other forms of toxic stress can suffer adverse effects on brain development.^{7,8} Specific effects of maltreatment depend on factors such as age at the time of abuse, whether the incidence was a one-time occurrence or chronic, identity of the abuser (i.e., parent or other adult), and severity of the incident.⁸ Additionally, the type of maltreatment a child experiences can increase the risk for specific health conditions.⁷ For example, children who experienced neglect are at increased risk for diabetes and poorer lung function while children who have been physically abused are at risk for diabetes and malnutrition.^{7,9}

Psychological Consequences

The psychological consequences of child abuse and neglect can manifest as educational difficulties, low self-esteem, depression, and trouble forming and maintaining relationships.⁷ Not only do abuse and neglect cause impairments to the brain's executive functions (memory, self-control, and cognitive

flexibility), victims can also develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).^{7,10,11} Furthermore, research has shown that PTSD in children can lead to depression, substance use and abuse, suicidal behavior, and oppositional or defiant behavior, affecting their ability to succeed in school and to create and foster relationships.^{7,11}

Behavioral Consequences

Victims of child abuse and neglect may present with significant behavioral problems, such as emotional instability and violent or aggressive behaviors well into adulthood.¹² Additionally, several studies have found a correlation between child maltreatment and juvenile delinquency and criminal activity.^{7,13} According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, child victims of physical and emotional abuse are more likely to develop antisocial behaviors.^{7,14} Furthermore, children who were neglected and abused are more likely to perpetrate the behavior and continue the cycle of abuse and neglect with their own children.^{7,15,16}

Societal Consequences

While the physical, psychological, and behavioral consequences of child abuse and neglect greatly impact the victims, it has consequences for the society as well in the form of direct costs (e.g., hospitalization, foster care costs, etc.) and indirect costs (e.g., loss of productivity at school, criminal justice system costs, etc.).⁷ The CDC estimates that in 2015, nonfatal incidents of child abuse and neglect amounted to a lifetime cost of \$831,000 per child, and fatal incidents of child abuse and neglect resulted in an estimated lifetime cost of \$16.6 million per child.^{7,17}

Policy Efforts to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA)

Originally enacted in 1974 and reauthorized in 2010, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) is a federally funded program to improve state child welfare systems.^{18,19} CAPTA provides federal funding and counsel to states in support of prevention, assessment, investigation, prosecution, and treatment activities to combat child abuse.²⁰ Furthermore, CAPTA establishes the Office on Child Abuse and Neglect and establishes a national clearinghouse of programs related to child abuse and neglect.^{18,20}

Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act (CANRA)

The Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act (CANRA) is a California law that requires employers to identify mandated reporters.^{19,21} Mandated reporters are individuals who are required to report observed or suspected child abuse or neglect to designated law enforcement or social services agencies.^{19,21,22} As a mandated reporter, two reports must be submitted: the first report by telephone immediately and a written

report within 36 hours of receiving information concerning the incident.²² Furthermore, mandated reporters are granted confidentiality and immunity and therefore are not civilly or criminally liable for any report that is required by the CANRA.^{22,23}

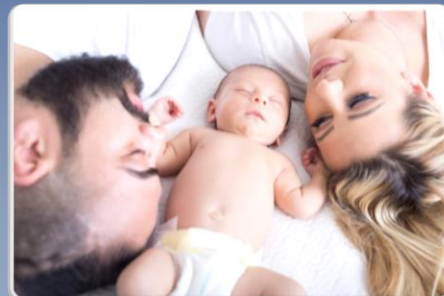
AB 506 – Youth Service Organizations: Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention

Signed into law in September 2021 by California's Governor Gavin Newsom, AB 506 went into effect January 1, 2022, and set new requirements for youth serving organizations in three areas: screening, training, and policies.²⁴ The law requires that:^{24,25}

- Administrators, employees, and volunteers must complete a background check. Those with a history of child abuse is excluded from working for or volunteering in a youth serving organization.
- Administrators, employees, and volunteers must complete child abuse and neglect reporting training.
- Youth serving organizations must develop and implement prevention policies and procedures.

Resiliency Institute for Childhood Adversity

With San Bernardino County (SBC) having one of California's largest populations of foster youth, the Resiliency Institute for Childhood Adversity (RICA) at Loma Linda University Health aims to provide seamless medical care and mental health services to children aged 0-21 in the Inland Empire who have been victims of trauma, such as abuse, neglect, and maltreatment.²⁶ In partnership with the SBC, RICA runs the Children's Assessment Center, which provides forensic interviews and medical examinations to assist in the evaluation allegations.^{27,28} In addition, RICA operates the Resiliency Clinic, which opened its doors in January 2022 to provide team-based, whole person care to children who have experienced abuse or are in foster care. Anyone interested in finding out more can call (909) 558-6715.



How to Recognize Child Abuse and Provide Help

Whether the abuse is physical, emotional, or sexual, the result is a child that feels unsafe, uncared for, and alone.²⁹ Warning signs that a child is being abused or neglected can vary based on the type of abuse inflicted. A child who is being abused may feel guilty, ashamed, or confused and be afraid to tell anyone about the abuse, especially if the abuser is a parent, other relative, or family friend.³⁰ Warning signs to look out for include:^{29,30}

- Being excessively withdrawn, fearful, or anxious about doing something wrong
- Changes in behavior (e.g., aggression, anger, hostility, or hyperactivity)
- Shying away from touch, flinching at sudden movements, or seeming afraid to go home
- Unexplained injuries (e.g., bruises, broken bones, or burns)
- Injuries that do not match the explanation given
- Sexual behavior or knowledge that is inappropriate for the child's age
- Delayed or inappropriate emotional development
- Social withdrawal or loss of interest or enthusiasm
- Loss of previously acquired developmental skills
- Lack of appropriate medical, dental, or psychological attention
- Poor personal cleanliness
- Hoarding or stealing food

If child abuse or neglect is suspected, contact your local child protective services office or law enforcement agency. Provide a complete, honest account of what you observed that led you to suspect the occurrence of child abuse or neglect. Any reasonable suspicion is sufficient. Additionally, contact the Childhelp National Abuse Hotline (call or text 1.800.422.4453) to talk with a professional crisis counselor in over 170 languages.³¹

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Did you know?

Of the 3 million children who received a child protected services investigation in fiscal year 2020, approximately three-quarters (76.1%) were neglected, 16.5% were physically abused, 9.4% were sexually abused, and 0.2% were sex trafficked.⁴



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