



# What You Need to Know about Abuse and Neglect

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No grandparent likes to imagine a grandchild being mistreated. But the reality is that children who live in a chaotic home, where chronic problems like family violence or substance abuse take place, are at high risk for abuse and neglect. As you adjust to caring for your grandchildren, you might also have to help them cope with the aftermath of abuse or neglect.

## What is Child Maltreatment?

Child maltreatment is any intentional action that causes physical, emotional, or mental damage to a child. Children are most often maltreated by an adult who is more powerful than they are.

Child maltreatment can happen anywhere, to children of all races and incomes. It may be happening just down the street, next door, or across the hall from where you live. Children who are maltreated can have permanent physical or emotional scars. In the most severe cases, abuse and neglect can cause death.

There are four different kinds of child maltreatment:

**Physical abuse:** Physical abuse is any intentional injury that hurts the child's body. Many physically abused children try to protect their abusers by telling others that their injuries were accidents. Slapping, shaking, whipping, and burning are examples of physical abuse.

**Emotional abuse:** Emotional abuse occurs when adults regularly belittle a child or intentionally say hurtful things. Emotional abuse is hard to identify because it does not leave visible marks on the child's body. But emotional abuse can be just as damaging as physical abuse. Threats, name-calling, insults, and ignoring the child for long periods are examples of emotional abuse.

**Sexual abuse:** Sexual abuse happens when adults involve children in sexual acts or situations. Any sexual act between an adult and a child is considered sexual abuse. Inappropriate touching or fondling, undressing, incest, exposure to pornography, and exposure to sexual situations are examples of sexual abuse.

**Neglect:** Neglect is failure to provide for a child's basic needs. Adults who do not provide children with adequate food, clothing, shelter, education, medical care, supervision, or emotional support are neglecting those children. Neglect is the most common type of child abuse.

## Warning Signs of Maltreatment

As a grandparent, you need to be alert to warning signs that your grandchild has been abused or neglected. Here are some common warning signs to look for. Be especially aware if your grandchild has more than one of these warning signs.

**Physical abuse:** Unexplained injuries such as bruises, welts, cuts, burns, and broken bones are common markers of physical abuse. Marks from abuse sometimes have the shape of the object that caused the injury (such as a cigarette or belt buckle). Pay special attention to injuries on the child's face, torso, back, buttocks, or thighs. Children are less likely to injure those parts of the body accidentally. Be concerned about broken bones in children who are not old enough to walk.

**Emotional abuse:** Keep in mind that emotional abuse can be hard to identify. Children who are emotionally abused may regularly degrade or insult themselves or others. They may be unwilling to try new things because they fear failure. You might notice emotional abuse by watching the parent interact with the child. Parents who are emotionally abusive may consistently belittle the child or make unfair demands.

**Sexual abuse:** Many children who are sexually abused are afraid to tell anyone. Watch for physical signs, such as torn or stained underclothes, difficulty in walking or sitting, and pain in the genital area. Pay attention to children who have inappropriate knowledge about sexual activities, especially in young children. Other signs include fear of going to bed, unwillingness to be alone with a particular teen or adult, unusually aggressive behavior, and regression to old behaviors such as bed wetting.

**Neglect:** Children who are neglected often show clear signs such as consistent hunger, poor hygiene, or inappropriate dress for the weather. Many neglected children are underweight and do not grow as quickly as most children. Some neglected children are left unsupervised for long periods or have irregular school attendance. A pattern of health problems that are left untreated may also suggest neglect.

Remember that there may be other explanations for most of these warning signs. Watch for patterns. If you see several signs, or if you suspect that your grandchild is being abused, insist that a doctor or counselor evaluate the child.

## Reporting Suspected Abuse

If you suspect your grandchild—or any child—is being abused, your first responsibility is to report it to ensure that the abuse is stopped. To report suspected abuse or neglect in Georgia, call your local Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) office at 1-855-GA-CHILD.

You also can call the National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-4-A-CHILD—they will help you find the right place to report the suspected abuse. Remember that you don't have to be absolutely sure that abuse has occurred; experts will investigate all reports. Your reports can be anonymous if you prefer.

## Family Violence

Many abused children are victims of family violence. Family violence is the mistreatment of one

family member by another. Violence in families tends to be a vicious cycle. Spouses who abuse their partner may also abuse their children. A spouse who has been abused may take out frustrations on their children. Children who are abused may hurt their siblings. Without help, many children who were abused grow up to abuse their own families.

Parents who abuse their children tend to be immature and unprepared for the stresses of being a parent. They may have unreasonable expectations of their children because they do not understand the children's limitations. Some parents abuse their children because they do not know any other way to parent. Many others are experiencing extreme stresses, such as economic hardship, and take out these frustrations on the child.

If you suspect your grandchild—or any child—is being abused, your first responsibility is to make sure that the abuse is stopped by reporting it. The good news is that children can overcome abuse with a lot of support and help from adults.

As a grandparent, you can help your grandchildren learn how to overcome the abuse. Very few abusive parents actually plan to harm their children. But when life stresses overwhelm them and they cannot cope with the challenges of parenting, they respond by striking out at the child. Most abusive parents do love their children. They need help and compassion to learn positive ways of guiding their children.

Until the abuse stops, however, children need protection. As a grandparent raising your grandchildren, you may be in the best position to protect the children. Your home can be a safe place where your grandchildren can escape from abuse.

## How Abuse Affects Children's Development

Why is it so important to report suspected child abuse? Children who experience violence growing up are at risk for later developmental problems. Abuse affects each child differently, but there are some common patterns.

For **infants**, learning to trust is their most important task. Trust is the foundation for self-esteem and all later relationships. Infants who are abused are less likely to receive the safety and nurturing they need to develop basic trust.

**Toddlers** are busy exploring the world and trying their new skills of walking, talking, jumping, and climbing. Toddlers build confidence in themselves by exploring and trying new things. Abusive parents may destroy toddlers' willingness to explore by restricting their activities.

**Preschoolers** are ready to venture outside the family to form new relationships. Many abusive parents do not allow their children to play with other children, because they are afraid that the abuse will be discovered. Abused preschoolers often have trouble getting along with others because their parents have not taught them positive social skills.

**School-age children** need to build the social and academic skills necessary to be successful as an adult. Children who are abused have trouble developing these skills. Children who live in constant danger are so drained or on edge that they have difficulty learning in school. They may not see the value of learning in school or getting along with others. Children who live with violence may learn that they have little control over what happens to them. They may feel angry about being a victim or seeing others victimized, and they may have trouble finding nonviolent solutions to problems.

Children respond to abuse in different ways. Children's coping abilities depend on their age, their family's reaction to stress, the type of abuse they experience, and their individual personalities. Children who have a supportive adult to count on are more likely to recover from abuse.

The good news is that children can overcome abuse with a lot of support and help from adults. As a grandparent, you can help your grandchildren change their perceptions of themselves, and you can teach them the survival skills that they did not learn while they were being abused.

## **Helping Grandchildren Cope With Abuse**



Many children who are abused have behavior problems. When grandchildren who were abused move into your home, you may have to deal with an angry, aggressive child or a child who is

withdrawn and avoids your attention. Here are some ways you can help smooth the transition and begin the process of recovering from abuse.

- **Keep routines consistent.** Children often misbehave when they do not know what to expect. Set up a regular routine at home and follow it every day. Keep bed times, meal times, and other activities on a regular schedule.
- **Develop new family traditions.** When children are no longer living with their parents, they may feel like their entire family has fallen apart. Keep reminding your grandchildren that you are a family. Take time to do things together as a family. Have the children help you decide how to celebrate birthdays and holidays. Traditions help reassure children that their world is safe and stable.
- **Use positive guidance.** Children who have been abused need warm, positive discipline to help them learn how to handle problems. Set clear rules, and enforce them every time they are broken. Help children learn how to negotiate and solve problems without resorting to violence. Give positive feedback when children work together or are kind to others.
- **Set priorities.** Help your grandchildren understand what activities are most important. Find a regular time for homework. Limit your grandchildren's out-of-school activities to a reasonable number. Setting priorities teaches your grandchildren how to manage time.
- **Treat your grandchildren as individuals.** Remember that each child has her own likes, dislikes, interests, and needs. All children are special and need to be accepted for who they are. Try to spend some time with each child individually.
- **Take time for yourself.** Find time to do some things just for you. Having time for yourself will give you more energy to handle the responsibilities of raising your grandchildren.
- **Look for support.** Spend time with positive people who understand what you are going through. Share your thoughts and concerns with a trusted friend. You may be able to find a support group for grandparents raising grandchildren in your area. See *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Caring for Yourself* for more information about grandparent support groups.
- **Find professional help.** Many children who have been abused need professional counseling to recover from the trauma of abuse. Ask a friend, pastor, or family doctor to recommend a good mental health professional. Some health insurance plans cover the cost of counseling, and many counselors have sliding fee scales for people unable to pay the full cost.

## In Summary

Raising your grandchildren is not an easy job, and helping grandchildren who have been abused can be even tougher. But you can help your grandchildren cope with the traumas of family violence, neglect, or abuse. With time and support, many grandchildren can overcome past abuse and become happy, secure, and well-adjusted young people.

## Finding Help for Your Family

There are many sources of help for families who have experienced violence or abuse. If you suspect a problem, seek help right away. Many services are free or inexpensive.

### Help in Crisis Situations

If you or your grandchildren are experiencing abuse and need emergency help, try the following:

- Hotlines provide telephone counseling, information, and referrals. Try the National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-4-A-CHILD.
- Shelters offer emergency and short-term lodging, protection, and counseling to help victims of abuse.
- Hospitals and mental health centers can offer emergency medical and mental health care.
- Police departments can be called for emergency intervention or protection. Many departments have special units that deal with family violence.

### Help in Noncrisis Situations

- Family and social-service agencies provide counseling, protection, referrals, and legal advice. DFCS is an example of a social-service agency that can help your family.
- Clergy and religious groups can provide counseling, parenting advice, classes on family life, and referrals.
- Parents Anonymous has chapters nationwide dedicated to helping abusive parents and their children through support and counseling.
- Self-help groups are available for abusers of alcohol and other drugs (for example, Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous). Most self-help programs also have groups for families.
- Legal-assistance centers provide legal help for victims who cannot afford a lawyer. Ask for referrals from DFCS, or search online for legal assistance.

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