



Unit 3 Identifying Abuse

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Discuss the various types of abuse and their potential consequences
- ✓ Identify some of the most common indicators of abuse
- ✓ Distinguish between the different signs and symptoms of different kinds of maltreatment

Unit 3

Identifying Abuse

Identifying the Various Types of Abuse

Identifying the abuse of children is particularly problematic in societies where child rearing is seen as a private, family matter, rather than one of public concern. For the children involved, they may not realise that what they are experiencing is abnormal.

Physical Abuse is the most obvious and easily identifiable form of abuse. It is sometimes visible when the explanation of a child's injury does not correlate with what is observed. Certain types of injury should always lead to suspicion of child mistreatment- such as bite marks (consistent with adult human teeth marks), cigarette burns, evidence of untreated broken bones, and signs of severe and long-term bruising, especially to the face, which cannot be explained by an accident such as a fall. One of the most serious types of physical abuse is the shaking of a small infant, which can cause catastrophic injuries (brain damage, spinal injury, and retinal haemorrhage and rib fractures caused by grasping the chest while shaking the child).

Emotional Abuse is significantly harder to detect. In some cases, children show no obvious signs of abuse and evidence is most likely to come from friends or neighbours who observe the parents' behaviour to the child, or from school teachers who may gain clues from the child's behaviour or emotional state. Impaired physical development, learning problems, speech disorders, and difficulties in forming relationships, withdrawal, disruptive behaviour, insecurity and poor self-esteem can all be possible results of emotional abuse. In many cases, the effects may only become evident in the child's later development stages. The presence of a trusted adult often holds the key to encouraging the child to reveal the abuse.

Sexual Abuse is also difficult to detect. Young children have been known to endure sexual abuse for many years without realising that what they experience is not normal and unacceptable, only to discover its significance during early adolescence when they learn about sexual behaviour.

Physical Neglect - often the clearest indicator is either that the child is failing to grow and develop in a way that is proportionate to the level of available nutrition, or in a way that distinguishes the child from other children within the family. With all forms of abuse, the child's behaviour may provide an indication as to what is happening. Care must always be taken to avoid reaching the wrong conclusions. In cases of suspected abuse, it is important to carefully and sensitively look for other evidence before concluding that abuse has occurred.

Signs and Symptoms of Abuse

Although none of the signs below confirm that a child has been abused, they can be helpful in recognizing that something is wrong. The possibility of abuse should be investigated if a child shows a number of these symptoms.

Regardless of how many potential indicators are present, it is important to fully investigate the situation.

Emotional Abuse

- Physical, mental and/or emotional development is slower than in other children
- Sudden speech disorders
- Self-depreciation showing lack of self-worth
- Overreaction to mistakes
- Extreme fear of any new situation
- Chronic running away
- Attention seeking behaviour
- Inappropriate response to pain
- Extremes of passivity or aggression

Sexual Abuse

- Being overly affectionate or knowledgeable in a sexual way inappropriate to the child's age
- Medical problems that may include chronic itching, pain in the genitals, venereal diseases
- Other extreme reactions, such as depression, self-mutilation, suicide attempts, running away
- Returning to younger behaviour patterns such as thumb sucking
- Sudden loss of appetite or compulsive eating
- Being isolated or withdrawn
- Inability to concentrate
- Lack of trust or fear of someone they know

Physical Abuse

- Unexplained injuries or burns, bruises, dislocations, bites
- Unlikely excuses for injuries
- Chronic running away
- Self-destructive tendencies
- Aggression towards others

- Distrust of adults
- Fear of physical contact - shrinking back if touched

Neglect

- Frequent hunger
- Stealing or hiding food
- Poor personal hygiene
- Constant tiredness
- Poor clothing
- Untreated medical problems
- No social relationships

Further Reading:

- ✓ Reece RM, Krous HF. Fatal child abuse and sudden infant death syndrome. In: Reece RM, Ludwig S, eds. Child abuse: medical diagnosis and management, 2nd ed. Philadelphia, PA, Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2001
- ✓ Kim DH et al. Children's experience of violence in China and Korea: a transcultural study. Child Abuse & Neglect, 2000,
- ✓ Khamis V. Child psychological maltreatment in Palestinian families. Child Abuse & Neglect, 2000