

Save a Child: How to Identify and Report Child Abuse¹

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Bibliography

Child abuse is a real problem and a concern for all persons working with children. In 2019, 3.47 million cases of child abuse were reported nationally. From this reported number, 656,000 children were confirmed to have been victims of some form of abuse in an estimated (USDHHS, 2019).

Nationally, the rate of incidence for Native American and African-American children was 14.8 and 13.8 per thousand respectively. This rate is almost twice that of their white counterparts. However, 43.5% of child abuse victims are white, whereas only 21% are African-American, 23.4% are Hispanic, and 1.4% are Native American or Alaska Native (USDHHS, 2019). Data from a University of Florida study on child welfare indicates that given identical family situations, abuse is more likely to be substantiated with regard to black children than with white children (Askew Institute, 2006). However, a later, randomized study determined that social economic status, not race, as a determining effect for reporting ambiguous injuries as abuse (Laskey et al, 2012)

In the fiscal year 2010-2011, 51,555 cases of abuse were verified in Florida in the 2010–2011 fiscal year. This number has dropped to 34,836 in FY 2020 (FCDF, 2020). The greatest tragedy of child abuse is summarized in this troubling statistic: an estimated 1,809 children died nationally as a result of child abuse in 2019, a number that been increasing over the past four years. There were 114 deaths in Florida in 2019 that were the result of abuse or neglect (USDHHS, 2019).

People who work with children, parents, and the general public may at some point in their lives and careers have to report child abuse. It is important that you be able to recognize the symptoms of abuse and be able to contact the appropriate authorities. By reporting abuse, you may save a child's life or prevent serious injury.

This publication discusses child abuse laws and procedures for reporting abuse. It also contains information about different types of abuse and how to identify abused or neglected children. Characteristics listed here are general and intended as guidelines. A child or family may exhibit many warning signs of abuse, though no abuse has occurred or ever will occur.

Prior to April 2012, Florida law required only child care providers, physicians, teachers, law enforcement officers, and any other person having reason to believe a child under the age of 18 is being abused, to report abuse. Failure to report suspected abuse was regarded as a misdemeanor.

Since then, Governor Scott signed into law one of the nation's strictest abuse reporting bills (Business Wire, 2012). Florida House Bill 1355 on the "Protection of Vulnerable Persons," signed in April 2012, proposes a fine of up to \$1 million on any college or university, public or private, whose administration or law enforcement willfully and knowingly fails to report child abuse occurring on campus in facilities or at university-sponsored events and functions. The Act requires the Florida Child Abuse Hotline to take

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allegations of child abuse reports even if the suspected abuser is *not* a caregiver or parent, and it has provisions for relocation of child victims of sexual assault when there is reasonable concern for their safety.

Most importantly, *everyone* must report abuse. Reporting suspected child abuse is no longer limited to teachers, law enforcement, and health care professionals. Florida now has the only fully mandatory abuse reporting law in the nation.

There are many different ways to report abuse. You may call the Department of Children and Families (DCF) **Central Abuse Hotline at 1-800-96ABUSE (1-800-962-2873)**. The **TDD number is 1-800-453-5145**. DCF has developed an online process of reporting that is very useful in filing your report. It is located on the web at <https://www.myflfamilies.com/service-programs/abuse-hotline/report-online.shtml>. More information about child protection in Florida is available from the DCF website at <https://www.myflfamilies.com>. It is not the responsibility of the person report-ing the suspected abuse to determine if abuse has occurred. An investigator will be assigned to determine this. Florida has an immunity law as well. This law protects you from lawsuits that could arise from reporting of the abuse so long as the incident is reported in “good faith.” **Remember: Report child abuse to protect the child, not to punish the suspected abuser.**

Indicators of Physical Abuse

Physical child abuse is the intentional harming of a child by an adult. This harm may include excessive shaking, bruising, beating (for example, with fists, belt, board, wire hanger, etc.), or burning (for example, scalding water, cigarette burns). There were 1,742 cases of physical child abuse in Florida in 2019 (USDHHS, 2019).

A common myth classifies child abuse as a problem of the poor. However, child abusers may be from any socioeconomic class, race, educational background, or religion.

Physically abused children can be identified by various means.

Physical Signs of Physical Abuse

- Cuts, bruises, or broken bones in different stages of healing
- Burns
- Unrealistic explanations for how injuries occurred

Behavioral Signs of Physical Abuse

- Aggressive or disruptive behaviors
- Excessively passive, such as shrinking at the approach of adults
- Fear of going home or of certain people

Indicators of Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is sexual contact with a child by another person who may use force or threats, or exploits a position of authority. Sexual abuse is known as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) that is linked to poor health outcomes. In fact, sexual abuse in childhood as an ACE is linked with the worst mental and physical health problems in adolescence and adulthood (as compared with divorce or growing up in poverty as ACEs) with physical abuse as a close second (Putnam et al., 2020). Like physical abuse, sexual abuse is not linked to any particular class, cultural group, or even age. For example, recent attention has been given to child-on-child sexual abuse, which most likely is the case of a victimized child re-enacting his/her abuse upon another child.* The sexual abuser is most often a parent, guardian, relative, family friend, or someone the child knows. Acts of sexual abuse perpetrated by strangers are usually single episodes with many different children, while familial sexual abuse is usually multiple occurrences to the same child over a period of months or years. There were 2,354 cases of child sexual abuse reported in Florida in 2019 (USDHHS, 2019).

* Child-on-child sexual abuse still needs to be reported the same way as other forms of abuse. Make sure to note the age of the child perpetrator as a case involving a child 12-years-old or younger will be handled differently than a child age 13 or older.

The common characteristics of a sexually abused child are discussed below.

Physical Signs of Sexual Abuse

- Trauma to the mouth, anus, or vagina (may include difficulty walking or sitting)
- Anal or vaginal bleeding
- The presence of semen or an enlarged vagina
- Painful urination
- Inability to control bowels

Behavioral Signs of Sexual Abuse

- Inappropriate sex play with peers or sexual knowledge unusual for age (may be revealed in drawings or stories)
- Inappropriate focus on genitals of self or others
- Reversion to more childlike behaviors (such as crying for no apparent reason)
- Withdrawal, depression, or change in personality
- Sleep problems and/or nightmares (also found with people with post-traumatic stress)

Indicators of Child Neglect

Child neglect is a condition in which a child's basic needs for food, shelter, clothing, prompt medical attention, and emotional support are not met. Unlike physical and sexual abuse, child neglect is a result of what parents or guardians **fail to do for** their children, not what they *do to* their children. This is the most common form of child abuse, with 12,893 cases reported in 2019 (USDHHS, 2019).

Similar to physical and sexual abusers, persons who neglect their children may be from any socioeconomic class, race, sex, religion, or educational background. Common indicators of child neglect include the following.

Physical Signs of Child Neglect

- Child is inappropriately dressed for weather
- Extreme hunger indicated by a child
- Unkempt appearance of a child or apparent lack of hygiene
- A child has not seen a physician in a timely manner for an illness

Behavioral Signs of Child Neglect

- Extreme misbehavior of a child
- A child gives excessive attention to others (for example, very "clingy" behavior)

Reporting Child Abuse or Neglect

Once you suspect abuse or neglect, you need to contact the proper authorities. Florida has the Florida Department of Children and Families. This organization is staffed by trained individuals who will take your call, and act upon the information you give them. Before you call, be sure you have the following information about the child:

- The child's name, age, address, and phone number

- The day you first noticed the abuse or neglect
- Any marks on the child and location of the marks
- Any other notable symptoms
- Any other important information

The fax transmittal form at <https://www.myflfamilies.com/service-programs/abuse-hotline/docs/faxreport.pdf> is an excellent source for reporters to write down the information needed for DCF investigators. Do not be concerned if you do not know all of the information on the form. List what you do know.

After a report is taken, a priority is given to it, either *immediate* or *24-hour*. All investigations are to commence within 24 hours of receiving the report. An investigator will interview the child and other sources to determine if abuse has occurred. (Just because you find marks on a child does not mean he or she was abused.)

If abuse or neglect has occurred, the caseworker will attempt to find out who is abusing or neglecting the child and/or refer the case to law enforcement. If it is a parent or guardian, the caseworker will establish the level of risk to the child and determine if separation is appropriate. Separation is usually temporary and requires a court order. When the home situation is stabilized, the child and his or her parent(s) may be reunited. Only in extreme situations is the child removed permanently from a home. DCF attempts to keep the family together, but the safety of the child comes first.

Summary

Abuse and neglect may happen to any child at any time by anyone. Contact your local Children and Family Services office for more information, training, and special local programs that protect children and strengthen families. By recognizing some common symptoms of abuse and neglect, you can bring about early intervention to alleviate a child's suffering and provide treatment for an abusive person.

On a positive note, Florida is believed to have "one of the most innovative child abuse systems in the entire country" based on their creation (unique to Florida) of state-funded child protection teams (Askew Institute, 2006, p. 14), as well as recently adopting House Bill 1355 in Florida law. Child protection teams have a goal of investigating suspected cases of child abuse and neglect and making appropriate referrals to service providers. For example, a multidisciplinary child protection team (within the Children's Medical Services Center) at the University of Florida involves

attorneys, pediatricians, psychologists, medical assistants, mental health counselors, social workers, and information systems specialists. This team serves 2 districts in the DCF and 16 North Central Florida counties.

Selected State and National Child Abuse Prevention Organizations

The Florida Central Abuse Hotline

(Voice): 1-800-962-2873

(TDD): 1-800-453-5145

(Fax): 1-800-914-0004

Website for Reporting and Information: <https://www.myflfamilies.com/service-programs/abuse-hotline/report-online.shtml>

The National Exchange Club

3050 Central Ave.

Toledo, OH 43606-1700

Phone: 419-535-3232

Toll-free: 800-XCHANGE (924-2643)

E-mail: nechq@aol.com

<https://www.nationalexchangeclub.org>

Prevent Child Abuse America

200 S. Michigan Avenue

17th Floor

Chicago, IL 60604-2404

Phone: 312-663-3520

Fax: 312-939-8962

E-mail: mailbox@preventchildabuse.org

<https://preventchildabuse.org>

Informational resource on reporting child abuse in Florida is available at: <https://www.myflfamilies.com/service-programs/abuse-hotline/publications/mandatedreporters.pdf>

Parent's Anonymous® Inc.

675 West Foothill Blvd., Suite 220

Claremont, CA 91711-3475

Phone: 909-621-6184

E-mail (for general information): Parentsanonymous@parentsanonymous.org

<http://www.parentsanonymous.org/>

Childhelp USA National Headquarters

15757 N 78th St.

Scottsdale, AZ 85260

Phone: 800-422-4453

<https://www.childhelp.org>

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