

Abuse and Neglect

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The following list compiled by the Child Welfare Information Gateway contains potential signs of abuse and neglect for children, in general. However, these guidelines can certainly be applied to children and adults affected with intellectual/developmental disabilities, and co-occurring mental health and/or behavioral disorders.

The Child:

- Shows sudden changes in behavior or school performance
- Has not received help for physical or medical problems brought to the parents' attention
- Has learning problems (or difficulty concentrating) that cannot be attributed to specific physical or psychological causes
- Is always watchful, as though preparing for something bad to happen
- Lacks adult supervision
- Is overly compliant, passive, or withdrawn
- Comes to school or other activities early, stays late, and does not want to go home (if abuse/neglect at home)

The Parent:

- Shows little concern for the child
- Denies the existence of — or blames the child for — the child's problems in school or at home
- Asks teachers or other caregivers to use harsh physical discipline if the child misbehaves
- Sees the child as entirely bad, worthless, or burdensome
- Demands a level of physical or academic performance the child cannot achieve
- Looks primarily to the child for care, attention, and satisfaction of emotional needs

The Parent and Child:

- Rarely touch or look at each other
- Consider their relationship entirely negative

- State that they do not like each other

Signs of Physical Abuse

Consider the possibility of physical abuse when the child:

- Has unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, or black eyes
- Has fading bruises or other marks noticeable after an absence from school
- Seems frightened of the parents and protests or cries when it is time to go home
- Shrinks at the approach of adults
- Reports injury by a parent or another adult caregiver

Consider the possibility of physical abuse when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- Offers conflicting, unconvincing, or no explanation for the child's injury
- Describes the child as "evil," or in some other very negative way
- Uses harsh physical discipline with the child
- Has a history of abuse as a child

Signs of Neglect

Consider the possibility of neglect when the child:

- Is frequently absent from school
- Begs or steals food or money
- Lacks needed medical or dental care, immunizations, or glasses
- Is consistently dirty and has severe body odor
- Lacks sufficient clothing for the weather
- Abuses alcohol or other drugs
- States that there is no one at home to provide care

Consider the possibility of neglect when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- Appears to be indifferent to the child
- Seems apathetic or depressed
- Behaves irrationally or in a bizarre manner
- Is abusing alcohol or other drugs

Signs of Sexual Abuse

Consider the possibility of sexual abuse when the child:

- Has difficulty walking or sitting
- Suddenly refuses to change for gym or to participate in physical activities
- Reports nightmares or bed-wetting
- Experiences a sudden change in appetite
- Demonstrates bizarre, sophisticated, or unusual sexual knowledge or behavior
- Becomes pregnant or contracts a venereal disease, particularly if under age 14
- Runs away
- Reports sexual abuse by a parent or another adult caregiver

Consider the possibility of sexual abuse when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- Is unduly protective of the child or severely limits the child's contact with other children, especially of the opposite sex
- Is secretive and isolated
- Is jealous or controlling with family members

Signs of Emotional Maltreatment

Consider the possibility of emotional maltreatment when the child:

- Shows extremes in behavior, such as overly compliant or demanding behavior, extreme passivity, or aggression
- Is either inappropriately adult (parenting other children, for example) or inappropriately infantile (frequently rocking or head-banging, for example)
- Is delayed in physical or emotional development
- Has attempted suicide
- Reports a lack of attachment to the parent

Consider the possibility of emotional maltreatment when the parent or other adult caregiver:

- Constantly blames, belittles, or berates the child
- Is unconcerned about the child and refuses to consider offers of help for the child's problems
- Overtly rejects the child

Reporting Abuse and Neglect

People with disabilities often do not report abuse, because they may not understand what abuse is. Communication problems can serve as a major obstacle for the individual, in terms of verbalizing occurrences of abuse and neglect. In addition, some individuals are viewed as very impressionable and unreliable when it comes to sharing information in general. As a result, their attempts to report abuse are quickly dismissed as being untrue or exaggerated, particularly because the nature of these accounts can initially appear highly doubtful. These are just a few of the many reasons why we need to be extra vigilant when it comes to overseeing all aspects of an individual's care, particularly the people responsible for providing this support. If possible, it is important to question the person about any safety issues they are experiencing.

If abuse or neglect is suspected contact 9-1-1 or the local police immediately

If the maltreated person is served by a community service provider, Developmental Center or hospital setting contact 9-1-1 and/or one of the State of New Jersey protective service divisions listed below. To access the Adult Protective Services (APS) and Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCP&P formerly DYFS) Fact Sheets can be found via the following websites, which describe how and when to report abuse and neglect to the appropriate authorities:

Preventing Abuse and Neglect

Overall, the most prudent course of action to preventing abuse and neglect involves the promotion of individuals with disabilities as valued and respected members of the community. This requires a multifaceted approach, so that preventative measures are comprehensive in scope, producing effective and sustainable outcomes.

- **Raising Awareness:** It is vitally important that we educate the general public not simply about the challenges faced by people with disability, but also about their significant personal accomplishments, as well as the positive impact their contributions and lives have on our society.
- **Creation of Safer Services and Environments:** The State of New Jersey's human service delivery system must continue to improve and consistently enforce higher standards of care and support for children and adults affected with disability. State agencies need to maintain and protect their safety, overall well-being, and rights as valued citizens. Adopting policies and implementing mandatory practices that prohibit all types of abuse and neglect, including restrictive behavior techniques, must be closely monitored. In addition, it is important to make sure that school programs, workplaces, state and private hospitals, and provider operated community residences are respectfully and effectively serving people with disability. Competently and compassionately meeting an individual's needs prevents abuse.
- **Recruitment and Training of Management Personnel and Direct Support Professionals:** The recruitment process for identifying those individuals who are best suited to work with children and adults with disability should adhere to a higher standard, because of the vulnerability of the persons being served. Salaries need to be commensurate with experience and required job responsibilities. Initial mandatory training on intellectual/developmental disability, psychiatric and behavior disorders is an absolute necessity, as well as training about the signs of abuse and neglect, and how to respond by reporting these incidences to the appropriate persons without fear of retribution or repercussions. Moreover, mandatory training should be ongoing and specific to the individuals under service provider management or support person's care.

- Community Integration: Increasing community-based housing options for people with disability fosters inclusion and reduces the risk of abuse and neglect. Creating opportunities for individuals to build relationships in the community through meaningful employment, volunteering, and participation in a wide range of activities, including community service projects will enhance the quality of life for the community as a whole.
- Education: State and local community education campaigns are essential to abuse prevention.
 - Knowing the warning signs of abuse and neglect, and how to seek assistance, motivates individuals with disabilities, their families, and others to take the appropriate steps to prevent and address it. Being properly informed also helps to avoid some of the common barriers to getting involved, such as concern that the report will not be believed, confidentiality breaches, or fear of personal or legal repercussions.
- Fostering a Person's Confidence: It is essential to educate individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities about their rights as citizens, as well as people with disabilities of specialized services. Training programs and the dissemination of information to increase knowledge and opportunities for skill building would serve to encourage self-advocacy, and greater independence. Individuals also need to be afforded increased support, in order to more freely participate in their communities, according to their personal choices. These steps can help reduce the chances of victimization. However, the right cultural and environmental supports must be in place to promote opportunities for self-empowerment, as well as the enforcement of necessary protective measures against abuse and neglect.
- Supporting Families and Caregivers: The high levels of stress experienced by family members, legal guardians and caregivers of individuals with disability can be the cause of abuse, but it is also considered a related symptom. It is essential that appropriate support be provided to both the person with disability, as well as his/her caregivers. Fostering resilience is key to reducing the risk of abuse and neglect. Better access to respite care, improved services and supports and case management oversight, establishing risk assessment and intensive support measures for families at risk, improving communication mechanisms so caregivers can voice their concerns, are just some of the specific actions that could be taken to prevent abuse and neglect.

Reference:

Sullivan, P.M. (2003). Violence Against Children with Disabilities: Prevention, Public Policy, and Research Implications. Conference Commissioned Paper for the National Conference on Preventing and Intervening in Violence Against Children and Adults with Disabilities (May 6-7, 2002) SUNY Upstate Medical University, NY.