

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is deliberately physically hurting a child. It might take a variety of different forms, including hitting, pinching, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning or suffocating a child.

Physical abuse can happen in any family, but children may be more at risk if their parents have problems with drugs, alcohol and mental health or if they live in a home where domestic abuse happens. Babies and disabled children also have a higher risk of suffering physical abuse.

Physical harm may also be caused when a parent or carer fabricates the symptoms of, or deliberately induces, illness in a child. Physical abuse can also occur outside of the family environment.

Bumps and bruises don't necessarily mean a child is being physically abused – all children have accidents, trips and falls. There's isn't one sign or symptom to look out for that will say a child is definitely being physically abused. But if a child often has injuries, there seems to be a pattern, or the explanation doesn't match the injury, then this should be investigated.

NSPCC statistics

We do not know exactly how many children are physically abused. But official statistics, research studies and what children tell us, give us a good idea about the abuse they are experiencing.

- Around 1 in 14 children in the UK have been physically abused.
- Concerns around physical abuse have been identified for around 1 in 10 children who are the subject of a child protection plan or on a child protection register in the UK.
- There were over 160,000 offences related to child physical abuse recorded by police in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2019/20.
- Physical abuse is the second most commonly mentioned form of abuse in both contacts to the NSPCC helpline and Childline counselling sessions.

[Statistics briefing: physical abuse \(nspcc.org.uk\)](https://www.nspcc.org.uk)

Some of the following signs may be indicators of physical abuse:

- Children with frequent injuries;
- Children with unexplained or unusual fractures or broken bones; and
- Children with unexplained:
 - bruises or cuts;
 - burns or scalds; or
 - bite marks.

Bruises

- commonly on the head but also on the ear or neck or soft areas - the abdomen, back and buttocks
- defensive wounds commonly on the forearm, upper arm, back of the leg, hands or feet
- clusters of bruises on the upper arm, outside of the thigh or on the body

- bruises with dots of blood under the skin
- a bruised scalp and swollen eyes from hair being pulled violently
- bruises in the shape of a hand or object.

Burns or scalds

- can be from hot liquids, hot objects, flames, chemicals or electricity
- on the hands, back, shoulders or buttocks; scalds may be on lower limbs, both arms and/or both legs
- a clear edge to the burn or scald
- sometimes in the shape of an implement for example, a circular cigarette burn
- multiple burns or scalds

Bite marks

- usually oval or circular in shape
- visible wounds, indentations or bruising from individual teeth.

Fractures or broken bones

fractures to the ribs or the leg bones in babies

multiple fractures or breaks at different stages of healing

Other injuries and health problems

- scarring
- effects of poisoning such as vomiting, drowsiness or seizures
- respiratory problems from drowning, suffocation or poisoning
- breast ironing or breast flattening, a practice of using hard or heated objects to suppress or reverse the growth of breasts, is a recognised form of child abuse (Crown Prosecution Service, 2019).

Fabricated or induced illness (FII) is a rare form of child abuse. It occurs **when a parent or carer, usually the child's biological mother, exaggerates or deliberately causes symptoms of illness in the child.**

FII is also known as 'Munchausen's syndrome by proxy' (not to be confused with [Munchausen's syndrome](#), where a person pretends to be ill or causes illness or injury to themselves).

Physical abuse, as an adverse childhood experience, can have a negative effect on the development of children's brains, potentially impacting their mental and physical capacities in later life. The effect of physical abuse on a child's developing brain can lead to an overactive stress response, impaired cognitive development and weakened executive function skills.

(Shonkoff et al, 2008; Shonkoff et al, 2014).

Some of the following signs might be indicators of all types of abuse or neglect:

- Children whose behaviour changes – they may become aggressive, challenging, disruptive, withdrawn or clingy, or they might have difficulty sleeping or start wetting the bed;
- Children with clothes which are ill-fitting and/or dirty;
- Children with consistently poor hygiene;
- Children who make strong efforts to avoid specific family members or friends, without an obvious reason;
- Children who don't want to change clothes in front of others or participate in physical activities;
- Children who are having problems at school, for example, a sudden lack of concentration and learning or they appear to be tired and hungry;
- Children who talk about being left home alone, with inappropriate carers or with strangers;
- Children who reach developmental milestones, such as learning to speak or walk, late, with no medical reason;
- Children who are regularly missing from school or education;
- Children who are reluctant to go home after school;
- Children with poor school attendance and punctuality, or who are consistently late being picked up;
- Parents who are dismissive and non-responsive to practitioners' concerns;
- Parents who collect their children from school when drunk, or under the influence of drugs;
- Children who drink alcohol regularly from an early age;
- Children who are concerned for younger siblings without explaining why;
- Children who talk about running away; and
- Children who shy away from being touched or flinch at sudden movements.

Risks and vulnerability factors

Physical abuse can happen in any family. But babies and children who have a disability are at a higher risk of suffering physical abuse (Jones et al, 2012).

Some parents may also struggle to provide their children with safe and loving care if they are facing difficulties such as:

- poverty
- poor housing
- substance misuse
- relationship problems
- domestic abuse
- the effects of childhood abuse or neglect.

If parents are isolated and don't get enough support, things can become even more challenging. The more of these problems a family is facing, the harder it can be to cope – and the greater the risk of harm to children.

What school staff should do if they have concerns about a child

Physical abuse may form a long-term pattern of behaviour. Adults who are concerned a child is being physically abused should record individual incidents to build up an overview of the child's lived experience. This should then be shared with other agencies as appropriate and used to decide what support a child and their family need.

If a child is frequently injured, and if the bruises or injuries are unexplained or the explanation doesn't match the injury, this should be investigated. A delay in seeking medical help for a child when it is needed should also be reported.

Any concern about a child should always trigger a conversation with the designated safeguarding lead to agree a course of action, although any staff member can make a referral to children's social care. (Additional options could include referral to specialist services or early help services and should be made in accordance with the referral threshold set by the Local Safeguarding Children Board).

Additional guidance and further reading

- **Keeping children safe in education –statutory guidance for schools and colleges** (September 2023)
- **Keeping children safe in education: information for all school and college staff**
- **What to Do If You're Worried a Child Is Being Abused** (2015)
- **Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges** (May 2018)
- **Working Together to Safeguard Children** (July 2018)
- **Effective Support for Children and Families in Essex** – guidance for all practitioners in working together with children and families to provide early help and targeted and specialist support (October 2021)
- **Essex Safeguarding Children Board**
<http://www.escb.org.uk/>
Includes a link to the **SET procedures (Southend, Essex, Thurrock Child Protection Procedures)**
- **National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children**
- www.nspcc.org.uk
- The **NSPCC Helpline** is a service for anyone concerned about the safety or welfare of a child. You can contact the helpline 24 hours a day, seven days a week by phone, email or online. 0808 800 5000
- **Childline**
<https://www.childline.org.uk/> 0800 1111
- **No one noticed, no one heard: a study of disclosures of childhood abuse** (NSPCC)
- **How safe are our children?** NSPCC report
- [Statistics briefing: physical abuse \(nspcc.org.uk\)](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)