

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.

- 1 in 14 children have been physically abused
- 19% of contacts to the NSPCC's helpline last year were concerns about physical abuse
- Disabled children are over 3 times more likely to be abused than non-disabled children
- Over 6,000 children were identified as needing protection from physical abuse last year
- The NSPCC's helpline responded to over 10,000 contacts about physical abuse last year
- Over 9,000 children and young people contacted Childline about physical abuse last year

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/physical-abuse/physical-abuse-facts-statistics/>

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

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).

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

If staff members have any **concerns** about a child they will need to decide what action to take.

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).

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.

Additional guidance and further reading

- **Keeping children safe in education –statutory guidance for schools and colleges** (September 2021)
- **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 (July 2017)
- **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
- <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/research-and-resources/pre-2013/child-abuse-and-neglect-in-the-uk-today/>