

PARENT Talk



About Child Abuse

Violence is harmful to children and sometimes carries long-term consequences. Without help, violence can escalate, causing serious injury or even death. Further, children who experience or witness violence can grow up to inflict violence on others or to suffer other problems.

What is it?

Child abuse – when an adult or older child mistreats another child – occurs in all economic and social classes. It includes emotional abuse, such as threats, insults and ridicule; physical abuse, such as slapping, hitting and burning; sexual abuse, such as fondling, rape and incest; and neglect, such as inadequate physical or emotional care.

While anyone can inflict abuse, most cases involve a parent or adult abusing a child in their home. Most cases also involve alcohol or other drugs and may follow a stressful situation. The mistreatment or neglect of a child by a parent, caregiver, or other family member is especially dangerous because children often can't escape or report the problem.

Adults or older children may abuse if they're immature or insecure, easily frustrated, and overwhelmed. They may lose control and hurt their children when trying to control them. Parents also may have unreasonable expectations. They may not understand a child's capabilities and limitations and may think the child is misbehaving intentionally.

Lack of parenting knowledge may also contribute to child abuse. For instance, an adult who doesn't know much about infants may yell, shake, or even hit the baby in an attempt to quiet him or her. Adults without parenting knowledge may also feel inadequate and guilty – they may take these feelings out on the child.

In tough economic times, money problems can create great stress for adults, and they may actually blame their children for the financial problems. Or they may take their frustrations out on their children.

Contributing factors

Why are some people violent toward their own family members?

The need for power and control can escalate to violence. Because it works, violence continues. In addition, stress such as job worries, unpaid bills and strained relationships can mount until the person feels overwhelmed and resorts to violence. Alcohol and other drugs can add to the problems. Family background also contributes. Studies show that some people learn to be violent toward family members as they grow up. For example, abused children may grow up to abuse their own families. Isolation is also a factor. In today's mobile society, many people lose contact with family and friends who

could provide emotional support. These people can feel trapped, not knowing where to turn for help.

Children vulnerable

While every family member suffers from violence, children are especially vulnerable.

Boys, particularly, are at risk if their fathers are violent. They may possibly model themselves after their fathers and become violent also, possibly at an early age, or they may exhibit emotional or behavioral problems or deviant sexual behavior.

Girls also may suffer emotional problems and may form unhealthy male-female relationships similar to the violent relationship between their own parent and his or her partner.

A healthy parental bond is necessary to emotional growth. Children without a healthy emotional bond may lose self-esteem and feel as if they have no control over their lives. They may learn not to trust the opposite sex, adults, or anyone.

Abused children often feel shame – that they can't protect themselves or others from the abuse. Sometimes this shame – and other feelings of anger, loss of control or sadness – lasts into their adult years.

Where to get help

Troubled families have many sources of help. If you suspect a problem, get counseling right away. Don't allow small problems to turn into larger ones.

First, look in the Yellow Pages under "Children," "Social Service Organizations," or "Crisis Intervention." Call one of the numbers listed, and don't worry about cost. Many services are free or inexpensive.

Shelters offer emergency and short-term lodging, protection and counseling. Police departments may be called for intervention or protection – many departments have special units that deal with family violence.

As a family member, you can help most by recognizing that there's a problem with violence. Realize that violence is not an acceptable way to solve problems. And seek help to find ways to communicate feelings resolve conflicts and express anger without resorting to violence.

If you need more advice, call Genesee Health System Crisis Services at (810) 257-3740 where a counselor is always available. TTY users call (810) 232-6310. ©