

Child Abuse - The Hidden Bruises

No. 5; Updated July 2004

The statistics on physical child abuse are alarming. It is estimated hundreds of thousands of children are physically abused each year by a parent or close relative. Thousands die. For those who survive, the emotional trauma remains long after the external bruises have healed. Communities and the courts recognize that these emotional "hidden bruises" can be treated. Early recognition and treatment is important to minimize the long term effect of physical abuse. Whenever a child says he or she has been abused, it must be taken seriously and immediately evaluated.

Children who have been abused may display:

- a poor self image
- sexual acting out
- inability to trust or love others
- aggressive, disruptive, and sometimes illegal behavior
- anger and rage
- self destructive or self abusive behavior, suicidal thoughts
- passive, withdrawn or clingy behavior
- fear of entering into new relationships or activities
- anxiety and fears
- school problems or failure
- feelings of sadness or other symptoms of depression
- flashbacks, nightmares
- drug and alcohol abuse
- sleep problems

Often the severe emotional damage to abused children does not surface until adolescence or later, when many abused children become abusing parents. An adult who was abused as a child often has trouble establishing intimate personal relationships. These men and women may have trouble with physical closeness, touching, intimacy, and trust as adults. They are also at higher risk for anxiety, depression, substance abuse, medical illness, and problems at school or work. Without proper treatment, physically abused children can be damaged for life.

Early identification and treatment is important to minimize the long-term consequences of abuse. Qualified mental health professionals should conduct a comprehensive evaluation and provide treatment for children who have been abused. Through treatment, the abused child begins to regain a sense of self-confidence and trust. The family can also be helped to learn new ways of support and communicating with one another. Parents may also benefit from support, parent training and anger management.

Physical abuse is not the only kind of child abuse. Many children are also victims of neglect, or sexual abuse, or emotional abuse. In all kinds of child abuse, the child and the family can benefit from evaluation and treatment from a qualified mental health professional.

See also: [*Your Adolescent*](#) (1999 Harper Collins)

[Click here to order *Your Adolescent* from Harper Collins](#)

Excerpts from *Your Child on the Traumatic Effects of Child Abuse*

In the view of some experts, child abuse in this country has reached almost epidemic proportions. According to a recent report, more than two million children are subjected to neglect and physical, emotional, or sexual abuse every year.

There is no standard definition of what constitutes child abuse, but each state has statutes that describe the forms of child abuse. Regardless of distinctions in legalistic terminology, however, experts agree that the abuse cases reported represent a small percentage of the actual number of children who are victims of severe abuse.

Causes and Consequences

Most parents prefer to think of chronic child abuse as something that happens to *other* people's children. While it is evident that certain kinds of stress make abuse statistically more likely – poverty, job loss, marital problems, extremely young and poorly educated mothers – abuse also occurs across all economic lines and in seemingly good homes. Many people blame the prevalence of violence on TV and in the movies, and while that theory has not as yet been fully substantiated, media violence may contribute to our acceptance of physical aggression toward children. It is worth noting that cultures in which corporal punishment is not sanctioned have much lower rates of child abuse.

###

If you find *Facts for Families*® helpful and would like to make good mental health a reality for all children, please consider donating to the Campaign for America's Kids. Your support will help us continue to produce and distribute *Facts for Families*, as well as other vital mental health information, free of charge.

You may also mail in your contribution. Please make checks payable to the AACAP and send to Campaign for America's Kids, P.O. Box 96106, Washington, DC 20090.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 7,500 child and adolescent psychiatrists who are physicians with at least five years of additional training beyond medical school in general (adult) and child and adolescent psychiatry.

Facts for Families® information sheets are developed, owned and distributed by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) and are supported by a grant from the Klingenstein Third Generation Foundation. Hard copies of Facts sheets may be reproduced for personal or educational use without written permission, but cannot be included in material presented for sale or profit. All Facts can be viewed and printed from the AACAP website (www.aacap.org). Facts sheets may not be reproduced, duplicated or posted on any other Internet website without written consent from AACAP. Organizations are permitted to create links to AACAP's website and specific Facts sheets. To purchase complete sets of Facts for Families, please contact the AACAP's Development and Communications Assistant at 800.333.7636, ext. 140.