

Protecting our children from child abuse

It is said that children are our most valuable resource. Yet, hundreds of thousands of children are physically abused in the United States each year and thousands needlessly die as a result of abuse.

A study in the August 4, 1999, issue of *JAMA* reports that the number of deaths of children under 11 years of age

who die as a result of child abuse are greatly underreported in the United States. Over a 10-year period, a review of medical examiners' reports in North Carolina showed the state vital records system underreported by almost 60% the number of deaths due to battering or abuse.

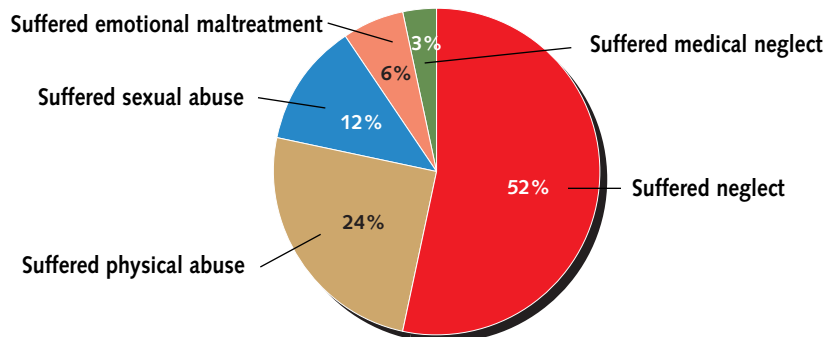
WHAT IS CHILD ABUSE?

The U.S. Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act defines child abuse and neglect as, at a minimum:

- Any recent act or failure to act resulting in imminent risk of serious harm, death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation ...
- of a child (a person under the age of 18, unless the child protection law of the state in which the child resides specifies a younger age for cases not involving sexual abuse) ...
- by a parent or caretaker (including any employee of a residential facility or any staff person providing out-of-home care) who is responsible for the child's welfare.

TYPES OF ABUSE:

- Physical abuse – Infliction of physical injury as a result of punching, beating, kicking, biting, burning, shaking, or otherwise physically harming a child.
- Child neglect – Failure to provide for a child's basic needs, physically, emotionally, medically, and educationally.
- Sexual abuse – Includes fondling a child's genitals, intercourse, incest, rape, sodomy, exhibitionism, and commercial exploitation through prostitution or the production of pornographic materials.
- Emotional abuse – Acts or omissions by the parents or other caregivers that have caused, or could cause, serious behavioral, cognitive, emotional, or mental disorders.



Child protective services agencies determined that almost 1 million children were identified as victims of substantiated or indicated abuse or neglect in 1996, an approximate 18% increase since 1990.

Source: National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information

HOW TO HELP:

If you suspect a child is being abused, contact the local child protective service agency or department of human services in your state, county, or local jurisdiction.

SIGNS OF ABUSE:

- A poor self-image
- Sexual acting out
- Aggressive, disruptive, and sometimes illegal behavior
- Anger and rage, or feelings of sadness or other symptoms of depression
- Self-destructive or self-abusive behaviors, suicidal thoughts
- Passive or withdrawn behavior
- Anxiety or fears, or flashbacks and nightmares
- School problems or failure
- Drug and alcohol abuse

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information
A Nation's Shame: Fatal Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States
800/394-3366 or www.calib.com/nccanch
- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
Public Information
800/333-7636 or www.aacap.org
- Prevent Child Abuse America
800/CHILDREN or www.childabuse.org

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm. A previous *JAMA* Patient Page on child sexual abuse was published on December 2, 1998, and a page on the stresses of parenting was published on March 3, 1999.

Additional Sources: National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control

Mi Young Hwang, Writer

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

Jeff Molter, Director of Science News

The *JAMA* Patient Page is a public service of *JAMA* and the AMA. The information and recommendations appearing on this page are appropriate in most instances, but they are not a substitute for medical diagnosis. For specific information concerning your personal medical condition, *JAMA* and AMA suggest that you consult your physician. This page may be reproduced noncommercially by physicians and other health care professionals to share with patients. Any other reproduction is subject to AMA approval. To purchase bulk reprints, call 212/354-0050.

