

Preventing Child Abuse & Neglect

What are child abuse and neglect?



Child abuse and neglect are serious public health problems and [adverse childhood experiences \(ACEs\)](#). They can have long-term impacts on health, opportunity, and wellbeing. This issue includes all types of abuse and neglect of a child under the age of 18 by a parent, caregiver, or another person in a custodial role (such as a religious leader, a coach, a teacher) that results in harm, the potential for harm, or threat of harm to a child. There are four common types of abuse and neglect:

- **Physical abuse** is the intentional use of physical force that can result in physical injury. Examples include hitting, kicking, shaking, burning, or other shows of force against a child.
- **Sexual abuse** involves pressuring or forcing a child to engage in sexual acts. It includes behaviors such as fondling, penetration, and exposing a child to other sexual activities. Please see [CDC's Preventing Child Sexual Abuse webpage](#) for more information.
- **Emotional abuse** refers to behaviors that harm a child's self-worth or emotional well-being. Examples include name-calling, shaming, rejecting, withholding love, and threatening
- **Neglect** is the failure to meet a child's basic physical and emotional needs. These needs include housing, food, clothing, education, access to medical care, and having feelings validated and appropriately responded to.

How big is the problem?

Child abuse and neglect are common. At least 1 in 7 children have experienced child abuse or neglect in the past year in the United States. This is likely an underestimate because many cases are unreported. In 2020, 1,750 children died of abuse and neglect in the United States.

Children living in poverty experience more abuse and neglect. Experiencing poverty can place a lot of stress on families, which may increase the risk for child abuse and neglect. Rates of child abuse and neglect are 5 times higher for children in families with low socioeconomic status.

Child maltreatment is costly. In the United States, the total lifetime economic burden associated with child abuse and neglect was about \$592 billion in 2018. This economic burden rivals the cost of other high-profile public health problems, such as heart disease and diabetes.

What are the consequences?

Children who are abused and neglected may suffer immediate physical injuries such as cuts, bruises, or broken bones. They may also have emotional and psychological problems, such as anxiety or posttraumatic stress.

Over the long term, children who are abused or neglected are also at increased risk for experiencing future violence victimization and perpetration, substance abuse, sexually transmitted infections, delayed brain development, lower educational attainment, and limited employment opportunities.

Chronic abuse may result in toxic stress, which can change brain development and increase the risk for problems like posttraumatic stress disorder and learning, attention, and memory difficulties.

How can we prevent child abuse and neglect?

Child abuse and neglect are preventable. Certain factors may increase or decrease the risk of perpetrating or experiencing child abuse and neglect. To prevent child abuse and neglect violence, we must understand and address the factors that put people at [risk for or protect them from violence](#). Everyone benefits when children have safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments. CDC developed [Preventing Child Abuse & Neglect: A Technical Package for Policy, Norm, and Programmatic Activities pdf icon](#)[4 MB, 52 Pages, 508] to help communities use the best available evidence to prevent child abuse and neglect. This resource is available in English and [Spanish pdf icon](#)[21MB, 52 Pages, 508] and can impact individual behaviors and relationships, family, community, and societal factors that influence risk and protective factors for child abuse and neglect.

Different types of violence are connected and often share root causes. Child abuse and neglect are linked to other forms of violence through [shared risk and protective factors](#). Addressing and preventing one form of violence may have an impact on preventing other forms of violence.

Prevention Strategies

Child abuse and neglect are serious problems that can have lasting harmful effects on victims. CDC's goal is to stop child abuse and neglect from happening in the first place.

Child abuse and neglect are complex problems rooted in unhealthy relationships and environments. Preventing child abuse and neglect requires addressing [risk and protective factors](#) at the individual, relational, community, and societal levels.

CDC developed a resource, [Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: A Technical Package for Policy, Norm, and Programmatic Activities pdf icon](#)[3.69 MB, 52 Pages, 508] to help states and communities use the best available evidence to prevent and reduce child abuse and neglect. This resource is available in English and [Spanish pdf icon](#)[21 MB, 52 Pages, 508] and can impact individual behaviors and the relationship, family, school, community, and societal factors that influence risk and protective factors for violence. Effective prevention strategies focus on modifying policies, practices, and societal norms to create safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments. The strategies and their corresponding approaches are presented in the table below.

Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect

Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect

Strategy	Approach
Strengthen economic supports to families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening household financial security • Family-friendly work policies
Change social norms to support parents and positive parenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public engagement and education campaigns • Legislative approaches to reduce corporal punishment
Provide quality care and education early in life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preschool enrichment with family engagement • Improved quality of child care through licensing and accreditation
Enhance parenting skills to promote healthy child development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early childhood home visitation • Parenting skill and family relationship approaches
Intervene to lessen harms and prevent future risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced primary care • Behavioral parent training programs • Treatment to lessen harms of abuse and neglect exposure • Treatment to prevent problem behavior and later involvement in violence



Strengthen economic supports to families

- Strengthening household financial security
- Family-friendly work policies



Change social norms to support parents and positive parenting

- Public engagement and enhancement campaigns
- Legislative approaches to reduce corporal punishment



Provide quality care and education early in life

- Preschool enrichment with family engagement
- Improved quality of child care through licensing and accreditation



Enhance parenting skills to promote healthy child development

- Early childhood home visitation
- Parenting skill and family relationship approaches



Intervene to lessen harms and prevent future risk

- Enhanced primary care
- Behavioral parent training programs
- Treatment to lessen harms of abuse and neglect exposure
- Treatment to prevent problem behavior and later involvement in violence

References

1. Fortson B, Klevens J, Merrick M, Gilbert L, Alexander S. (2016). Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: A Technical Package for Policy, Norm, and Programmatic Activities. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
2. Leeb RT, Paulozzi L, Melanson C, Simon T, Arias I. Child Maltreatment Surveillance: Uniform Definitions for Public Health and Recommended Data Elements, Version 1.0. Atlanta (GA): Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control; 2008.
3. Finkelhor D, Turner HA, Shattuck A, Hamby SL. Prevalence of Childhood Exposure to Violence, Crime, and Abuse: Results from the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2015;169(8):746–754. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2015.0676
4. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2022). Child Maltreatment 2020. Available from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/researchdata/technology/statistics-research/childmaltreatmentexternal> icon.
5. Klika JB, Rosenzweig J, Merrick M. Economic burden of known cases of child maltreatment from 2018 in each state. *Child and adolescent social work journal.* 2020 Jun;37(3):227-34.
6. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.(2022). Health and Economic Costs of Chronic Diseases. Available from <https://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/about/costs/index.htm>
7. Shonkoff J, Garner A, & Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care, and Section on Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics. (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), e232-e246.
8. Preventing Multiple Forms of Violence: A Strategic Vision for Connecting the Dots. (2016). Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Top of Page](#)

Page last reviewed: April 6, 2022Content source: [National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention](#)