

From the office of Army Community Service (ACS) FAP Manager, Pandora Brown, LCSW, LMSW
pandora.l.brown.civ@mail.mil

ACS Family Advocacy Program (FAP) Article: "Recognizing The Signs of Child Abuse"

Recognizing the Signs of Child Abuse

The Defense Department and Family Advocacy Program are committed to promoting the well-being of children and families by addressing child abuse and neglect and working to prevent it.

An estimated one in four children have experienced abuse or neglect at some point in their lives. The abuse most often occurs at home and is typically committed by those who are well known to the child, such as their parents or other relatives, babysitters and family friends.

The good news is that child abuse and neglect can be prevented. You can do your part to keep military children safe and secure by:

- Learning more about what child abuse and neglect are
- Understanding signs that a child may be at risk
- Knowing [how to report suspected abuse](#)

What is child abuse and neglect?

The DOD and each of the military services define child abuse and neglect as:

- Physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect of a child by a parent, guardian or foster parent caregiver under circumstances indicating that a child is being harmed or having their welfare threatened.
- Such acts by a sibling, other family member or another person will be deemed to be child abuse only when the individual is providing care under an expressed or implied agreement with the parent, guardian or foster parent.

Child abuse generally falls into one of these categories:

- **Emotional abuse** includes a pattern of verbal and nonverbal behaviors that have a negative effect on the child's psychological well-being. These include constant criticism, threats,

humiliation and rejection. It can also include a parent or caregiver intentionally withholding affection or a child being exposed to domestic abuse.

- **Neglect** includes the failure to provide for a child's basic physical, emotional, medical or educational needs. For example, if a parent or caregiver withholds food from a child as a punishment for misbehaving, it is neglect. This can also include a lack of supervision, such as being on a playground unattended.
- **Physical abuse** includes any behavior that involves the use of force to harm a child, such as punching, kicking, biting, shaking, throwing, stabbing, choking or burning.
- **Sexual abuse** involves any contact with a child of a sexual nature. This includes physical touch involving a sexual body part belonging to the child or the caregiver. It also includes forcing a child to look at a caregiver's sexual body parts or intentionally exposing them to explicitly sexual material. It is important to remember that children cannot legally consent to any sexual activity.

Know the risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect.

Experts have identified common factors that may increase the risk for child abuse or neglect occurring.

- **At the individual level**, parents who have a history of adverse childhood experiences, including experiencing abuse or neglect themselves, may be more likely to similarly mistreat their own children. This is because abuse is often a learned behavior, and our earliest experiences can have a big impact on our future relationships. Expressions like, "I grew up with it, and I turned out fine" may be a red flag. Other factors that may increase the risk of parents abusing or neglecting their children are a lack of knowledge of child development and the absence of a support system. Children who live in a home with a nonbiological parent or the intimate partner of a biological parent may also be at an increased risk of being abused. Those who are younger, and perhaps less prepared to become parents, may need additional support to build healthy and nurturing relationships with their children. Also, parents who struggle with alcohol and other drug addictions are at risk of exposing their children to dangerous substances and may be less likely or able to provide for their safety.
- **At the family level**, parents who are under particular stress, such as those dealing with financial trouble or demanding work situations, may be at a higher risk of neglecting their children. Times of uncertainty or crisis can lead to higher risk as well. For example, adults who do not have effective coping skills may take out their anxiety on their children or partner by yelling, screaming or hitting. Parents with a history of relationship violence, with one parent abusing the other, may be at risk for exposing their children to domestic abuse, which can have a long-term impact on their social and emotional development.

- **At the community level**, the level of risk increases if community members in general are unaware of the signs of abuse or don't know who to call if they suspect abuse.

The conditions brought on by the pandemic may also have put children, including older ones, at a greater risk of being abused. Data from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) for 2021 shows that more than a third of high school students reported that they were struggling with their mental health during this time. And more than half said that a parent or older adult had inflicted emotional abuse on them at home.

Know the signs of child abuse and neglect.

A child who is being abused or neglected may feel guilty, ashamed or confused. They may be afraid to tell someone, especially if the person harming them is a parent, sibling, other relative or a family friend. Learn the indicators of child abuse and neglect and how to [teach your child about healthy body boundaries](#).

Children who seem afraid of their parents, older youth, an adult caregiver or a family friend may be experiencing abuse or neglect. [Red flags may include when a child:](#)

- Shows sudden changes in behavior or school performance
- Has not received help for physical or medical problems brought to the parents' attention
- Has learning difficulties, or trouble focusing that cannot be attributed to specific physical or psychological causes
- Is always watchful, as though preparing for something bad to happen
- Seems to always lack adult supervision
- Has unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones or black eyes
- Has fading bruises or other marks noticeable following an absence from school
- Seems frightened of their parent or caregiver and protests or cries when it is time to go home from a playdate, school or other activity
- Is abusive toward pets or other animals

How you can help

Reporting child abuse only takes a minute, but it takes courage and a commitment to keeping children healthy and safe. If you're concerned about a child or family, but aren't sure whether abuse is occurring, err on the side of safety.

Reporting provides the opportunity to prevent or stop abuse and enables the family to get the help they need. Everyone has a moral obligation and, in many cases, a legal responsibility to take action to end child abuse and neglect.

Depending on the situation and your state requirements, you may report child abuse or neglect to one or more of the following organizations:

- **Be a trusted adult**: It's important that we work together as a military community to protect children and teens. Be an adult who children can trust so they have a broad support system around them if they need help. Even if you do not have children, you may be the connection a child or teen needs.
- **Military police or 911**: If you are a direct witness to violence or have reason to believe a child is in immediate danger, call 911 or your installation's law enforcement office.
- **Family Advocacy Program**: If you suspect child abuse or neglect, call your nearest FAP office. Each installation that supports military families will have a Family Advocacy Program point of contact for child welfare and safety. The number will be available at your installation's Military and Family Support Center and is generally listed on the installation website and throughout the military community. You can also visit MilitaryINSTALLATIONS to locate the installation FAP.
- **Child Welfare Services**: By reporting an incident of suspected child abuse or neglect to FAP, the Child Welfare Services agency closest to your installation will be contacted. Each state has its own civilian office dedicated to child welfare services.
- **Other resources**: You can also call your state's child abuse reporting hotline or call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 800-422-4453.

Strong communities strengthen families. Parents, caregivers and community members can help by being informed, attentive and supportive of children. To learn more, read "What is Child Abuse and Neglect? Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms."

Source: [Recognizing Signs of Child Abuse | Military OneSource](#)

POC:

Pandora Brown, LCSW, LMSW pandora.l.brown.civ@mail.mil

Army Community Service

Family Advocacy Program Manager

U.S. Army Garrison-Detroit Arsenal

586-282-0475