

How to be aware of child abuse in your congregation

Child abuse is sadly underreported because of fears and concerns of those who question if it is really occurring, are confused about how to report abuse, or are fearful of angering parents by making a report. However, you may be considered a “mandated reporter,” meaning that if you suspect abuse, you must report this belief to the authorities. They then determine if there are enough grounds to pursue an investigation. Mandated reporters include counselors, teachers, clergy, and medical professionals.

There are four types of child abuse: physical, sexual, emotional, and neglect. Signs to look for include (from *Parents Anonymous of Pennsylvania*):

Physical Abuse: unexplained marks, burns, bites, cuts, and bruises. Often the child cannot explain or avoids explanation of how the marks got there. In terms of the child’s behavior, you may see more anger and anti-social behaviors or the opposite—“jumpy,” startles easily, often if you move a hand past his or her face. You may see symptoms of depression, suicidal feelings, drug and alcohol abuse, and school problems.

Emotional Abuse: depression, suicidal behaviors, low self-esteem, anger or hostility, eating disorders, concentration problems, sleep disturbances.

Sexual Abuse: sexual behaviors demonstrated by children who should have no knowledge of this, excessive masturbation or “riding” on furniture or objects, seductiveness with adults, touching adult genitals when being hugged or held, perpetrating other children, avoidance of anything considered sexual, dislike of own body parts or mutilation of body parts (for example, cutting or burning), eating disorders, withdrawal and depression, fearfulness of a particular individual, excessive clinging to parent when separating, nightmares, or bedwetting. (*For more information, see our article on Sexual Abuse, also posted at www.diakon.org/fls.)*

Neglect: improper clothing for weather, poor hygiene, hair unwashed, extreme hunger, apparent lack of supervision (children playing on a busy street or running throughout a neighborhood that is unsafe).

Parents Anonymous of Pennsylvania offers free on-site training on recognizing and reporting suspected child abuse and neglect for mandated reporters. Simply call Parents Anonymous at 1-800-448-4906 to arrange for trainings or to obtain materials that may be of benefit to you as a mandated reporter.

Other Web sites that may provide good resources are:

www.extension.umn.edu Information about corporal punishment

www.ianr.unl.edu Information on parenting

<http://kidshealth.org>

<http://privacyrights.org> Protecting your children on the Internet

To report suspected child abuse in Pennsylvania, call ChildLine at 1-800-932-0313.

To report suspected child abuse in Delaware, call 1-800-292-9582.

*Diakon Family Life Services
1-877-DIAKON-7, Option 6*