

## Appendix 5: Identifying Child Abuse

- Each case of child abuse and neglect is individual.
- The child is always the victim.
- Although Ohio \* law permits corporal punishment in the home, school and institution, **excessive physical discipline is abuse**. It is difficult to define “excessive,” but there are guidelines you can use. Physical discipline probably is excessive if:
  - It results in physical injury, including bruises
  - The injuries are in particularly sensitive locations (eyes, genitals)
  - It is inconsistent, arbitrary punishment designed not to educate, but to instill fear
  - The caretaker loses control during discipline
  - It is inappropriate to the age of the child
  - It is the result of unreasonable expectations or demands on the child by the caretaker
- A perpetrator of child abuse or neglect can be any person who has care, custody, or control of the child at the relevant time. This could include parent, stepparent, teacher, babysitter or day care staff person, relative, institution staff person, bus driver, playground attendant, caretaker, parent’s boyfriend/girlfriend, or anyone with whom the child has contact. There also are instances when the parent or regular caretaker can be held responsible for abuse or neglect perpetrated by another; for example, when a parent allows the spouse to physically abuse their child, or when a child is left in inappropriate care and subsequently suffers abuse or neglect.
- There are not simple answers. Abuse or neglect rarely occurs in clear, simple and specific terms. Abuse or neglect usually results from complex combinations of a range of human and situational factors.

### What We Know About Identifying the Abuser

Many of us have felt at times that life is more than we can handle. What stops us from giving up or lashing out are skills and mechanisms we have learned to control or divert our anger, accept and assume adult responsibility, recognize realistic boundaries of acceptable behavior and expectation, and seek and accept help and support. When adults are faced with a situation which requires the use of coping skills that have not been developed, child abuse or neglect often results.

Although this explanation is oversimplified, it does help us understand how abuse and neglect can occur. It also explains the term “cycle of child abuse and neglect.” Children learn from their parents. A child who has been raised in a home where violence is an accepted response to frustration will, as an adult, tend to react violently. The skills necessary for controlling anger or frustration are never learned. What is learned is violence.

In the same way, a parent who lacks self-esteem or maturity cannot instill these characteristics within his child. Without significant outside influences, the child is likely to become an adult who perceives himself and life in the same manner as his parent does. This is the cycle of child abuse and neglect: adults tend to repeat the actions and attitudes which they learn as children.

### Adults who abuse or neglect children usually will share several of the following general characteristics:

<b>Isolation</b>	Adults who abuse or neglect children often do not have the support they need. They are isolated physically and emotionally from family, friends, neighbors, and organized groups. They may discourage social contact, and rarely will participate in school or community activities.
<b>Poor self-concept</b>	Many of these adults perceive themselves as bad, worthless, or unlovable. Children of parents with a poor self-concept often are regarded by their parents as deserving of abuse or neglect, because they see their children as reflections of themselves. They view abuse and neglect as behavior that is expected of them.

<b>Immaturity</b>	This characteristic may be reflected in many ways: impulsive behavior; using the child to meet the adult's own emotional or physical needs; a constant craving for change and excitement.
<b>Lack of parenting knowledge</b>	Many times, abuse or neglect results because the adult does not understand the child's developmental needs. Abusive parents often are strict disciplinarians who are frustrated from unmet expectations. These parents tend to place unrealistic demands upon their children, and view their child's inability to perform as willful, deliberate disobedience.
<b>Substance abuse</b>	It has not been clearly established whether substance abuse is a causative or a resulting factor. However, studies consistently have shown a correlation between the misuse of drugs or alcohol and the occurrence of abuse and neglect.
<b>Lack of interpersonal skills</b>	The abusive or neglectful adult often has not learned to interact with people, socialize, or work with others.
<b>Unmet emotional needs</b>	Often, the abusive or neglectful parent has unmet basic emotional needs—warmth, support, love. Unable then to provide the child with these feelings, they will instead seek fulfillment from the child.

#### **In the family where physical abuse occurs, the abusive adult may...**

- Have unrealistically high standards and expectations for himself/his children
- Be rigid or compulsive
- Be hostile and aggressive
- Be impulsive with poor emotional control
- Be authoritative and demanding
- Fear or resent authority
- Lack control or fear losing control
- Be cruel or sadistic
- Be irrational
- Be incapable of child rearing
- Trust no one
- Believe in the necessity of harsh physical discipline
- Accept violence as a viable means of problem resolution
- Have an undue fear of spoiling the child
- Consistently react to the child with impatience or annoyance
- Be overcritical of the child and seldom discuss the child in positive terms
- Lack understanding of the child's physical and emotional needs
- Lack understanding of the child's developmental capabilities
- Perceive himself as alone, without friends or support
- View seeking or accepting help as a weakness
- Be under pressure
- Have an emotionally dependent spouse
- Be engaged in a dominant-passive marital relationship
- Have marital problems
- Have been physically abused himself

#### **In the family where sexual abuse occurs, the abusive adult may...**

- Be overly protective of the child
- Refuse to allow the child to participate in social activities
- Be jealous of the child's friends or activities
- Accuse the child of promiscuity
- Distrust the child
- Have marital problems
- Need to be in control or fear losing control
- Be domineering, rigid, or authoritative
- Favor a "special" child in the family
- Have been sexually abused himself

#### **In the family where emotional maltreatment occurs, the maltreating adult may...**

- Act irrationally or appear to be out of touch with reality
- Threaten the child's health or safety

- Be deeply depressed
- Exhibit extreme mood swings
- Constantly belittle the child or describe the child in terms such as “bad,” “different,” or “stupid”
- Be cruel or sadistic
- Be ambivalent towards the child
- Expect behavior that is inappropriate for the child’s age or developmental capabilities
- Constantly shame the child
- Threaten the child with the withdrawal of love, food shelter, or clothing
- Reject the child or discriminate among children in the family
- Be involved in criminal activities
- Use bizarre or extreme methods of punishment
- Avoid contact with the child, seldom touching, holding or caressing him
- Avoid looking or smiling at the child
- Be overly strict or rigid
- Torture the child
- Physically abuse the neglect the child
- Have been abused or neglected himself

**In the family where neglect occurs, the neglecting adult may...**

- Be apathetic
- Have a constant craving for excitement and change
- Express dissatisfaction with his life
- Express desire to be free of the demands of the child
- Lack interest in the child’s activities
- Have a low acceptance of the child’s dependency needs
- Be generally unskilled as a parent
- Have little planning or organizational skills
- Frequently appear unkempt
- Perceive the child as a burden or bother
- Be occupied more with his problems than he is with the child’s
- Be overcritical of the child and seldom discuss him in positive terms
- Have unrealistic expectations of the child, expecting or demanding behavior beyond the child’s ability
- Seldom touch or look at the child
- Ignore the child’s crying or react with impatience
- Keep the child confined, perhaps in a crib or playpen, for long periods of time
- Be hard to locate
- Lack understanding of the child’s physical or emotional needs
- Be sad or moody
- Fit the clinical description “passive and dependent”
- Lack understanding of the child’s developmental capabilities
- Fail to keep appointments and return telephone calls
- Have been neglected himself

**Adolescent Offenders:** Adolescent offenders account for an estimated one-third of the sexual offenses against young children. The majority of these offenses occur either in their own home involving a younger sibling or in the role as baby sitter for other young children. These offenders reflect many of the same characteristics as an adult offender and are often “loners” with minimal peer relationships.

*\* This document was written for Ohio professionals, but this chart applies more generally.*

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<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=2918>