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## **Emotional, Physical, and Sexual Abuse of Children and Teens**

Emotional, physical, and sexual abuse are all too common in the United States and can happen to anyone. Nearly one million instances of child abuse are reported each year, and about four thousand children die as a result. About one-quarter of the cases involve sexual abuse.

Let's look at the various types of abuse one at a time.

Emotional abuse leaves no visible marks on a person, but it's painful nonetheless. An example of emotional abuse would be to continually call a child or teen a humiliating name, such as "good for nothing," "stupid," or "idiot." Another example would be to continually belittle the child or teen, such as by always making fun of how he or she looks. Emotional abuse is hurtful, it slows mental development, and it damages self-esteem.

Physical abuse includes any form of beating, such as slapping or hitting with the hands or fists—including the use of objects, such as belts, sticks, or kitchen utensils. Additionally, physical abuse includes any other form of abusive treatment that hurts the child, such as burning. And finally, physical abuse includes the neglect of a child's physical needs, such as food, clothing, or proper housing. It's important to remember that—although some parents or guardians slap or spank a child as a means of discipline—it is now widely agreed that physical punishment constitutes abuse if actual injury occurs to the child, or if any marks on the skin are left, such as bruises or abrasions.

Sexual abuse includes any kind of inappropriate touching or sexual fondling, oral contact, or intercourse. Sexual abuse also includes forcing a child to watch adult sexual activity.

One specific form of sexual abuse is incest. This is sexual contact by a member of a family, related by birth or by adoption. People who commit incest are usually male and may include fathers, stepfathers, brothers, grandfathers, or uncles. Most victims are girls, but boys can be victims, too. And incest does not discriminate: It occurs within every religion, race, and socioeconomic group.

Although it may seem ironic, the person who commits incest has often been similarly abused himself in the past. Furthermore, he is often an alcoholic. The spouse of this person may be absent from home because of illness or work and may or may not know about the abuse that is taking place. If the spouse does know or suspects what is going on, she will often deny or ignore the problem and, ultimately, do nothing to stop it.

Female victims can be almost any age, from toddlers to teens. They are often threatened that if

they share their horrible secret with anyone, terrible things will happen. Shame and bribery may also keep them silent. Often, these girls rebel against their mothers for not protecting them. They are also more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs, and they are more likely to engage in prostitution—especially if the incest occurred at an early age.

If you or someone you know is being abused emotionally, physically, or sexually, you can call the Children's Protective Services Department in your county for help. You can also talk to your health care professional, a school nurse, counselor or teacher, or someone at your church. Your local YMCA, YWCA, police department, or hospital should have information on shelters and safe homes. And the Health Education Center at your local Kaiser Permanente facility has resources available, too. The important thing is to get help and to remember that the abusive situation is not fault of the victim.

Finally, don't think that running away from home can solve the problem. The only thing that will help end the abuse is to find someone you trust who can help you stop it. Physical and sexual abuse are crimes, and health care professionals and other professionals are required by law to report abuse to local law enforcement authorities. While this may make some children and teens worry about putting a family member in jail, it's an important step toward ending the cycle of abuse and getting the abuser to seek help. Jail, incidentally, is usually necessary only in extreme cases. The main objective of the police and the social service agencies is to help everyone involved solve the problem in the best manner possible.



For additional health information you can trust:

- Log on to our members-only Web site at [www.kaiserpermanente.org/california](http://www.kaiserpermanente.org/california), then click the "Kaiser Permanente Members Only" button
- Visit your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center
- Check your Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone messages at 1-800-33 ASK ME (1-800-332-7563)

To get your free Handbook and Healthphone Directory, call 1-800-464-4000.

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent health problems or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor or other health care professional.

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