

Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month; an opportunity for the Violence Prevention Office at the American Psychological Association to inform parents and caregivers about what abuse is and how to prevent it.

What is Child Abuse?

It is a parent or caregiver's action or failure to take action that results in death or serious physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, or neglect of a child. It also includes acts that have a potential for harm.

Physical abuse refers to use of hands, feet, mouth or objects to cause injury of a child on purpose and includes beating, biting, kicking, striking.

Sexual abuse is the use, persuasion, or forcing of a child to engage in sexual acts or imitation of such acts.

Emotional abuse includes making fun of a child, name calling, always finding fault, use of harsh words to criticize behaviors, use of fear to control behavior.

Neglect is the failure to meet a child's basic needs such as food, shelter, medical or mental health treatment, adequate education or emotional comfort.

Who Can Be at Risk to Become an Abuser?

Abuse and neglect happens in families from all backgrounds and there is no single cause; rather it occurs as a result of many factors. They include adults:

- who were abused as children;
- who use alcohol or drugs;
- who have difficulty with controlling their anger and frustration;
- who are going through life stressful situations such as financial difficulties, job-related or unemployment issues, marriage problems;
- who get frustrated because they expect too much of a child, or don't know how to discipline a child without violence and use harsh discipline;
- who have mental health issues such as depression that is undiagnosed or not treated; and
- those who are single parents living in poverty with few social supports.

Major Consequences of Abuse for Children

Abuse and neglect have serious consequences for children that can compromise their growth and development and have long term impacts in their lives. The major consequences for children are:

Psychological consequences including depression; low self-esteem; anxiety; eating and sleeping disorders; risky behaviors such as alcohol and drug use; higher risk for youth

violence and violent behavior; greater risk for later aggressive behaviors toward friends and partners.

Physical consequences including immediate physical injuries due to physical abuse and neglect; but there are also long term consequences such as having poor health habits, and risk for lung disease, heart and liver disease.

Developmental consequences including alterations and disruptions that affect brain structure and brain chemistry and that can have implications for learning and behavior.

How to Prevent Child Abuse

The early years are crucial in children's lives; childhood experiences can have positive or negative longstanding impact. During their early years, it is important to raise children in an environment that meets their basic needs and provides safe, stable, nurturing relationships between children and their parents or caregivers and creates rich positive learning opportunities for them to thrive. Parents and caregivers are the most influential people in children's lives and should provide them with a strong foundation for lifelong successful path.

Tips for Parents and Caregivers on Raising Children without Violence

1. **Be realistic and patient.**
 - **Know** what children are capable of understanding and doing at different ages.
 - **Expect** your children to act like children; they are not little adults.
 - **It is not personal.** Children misbehave because they are still learning how to behave.
 - **Show respect** for your children's stage of development and accept their unique personality.
2. **You are the most important teacher.**
 - **Pay attention** to what you say and do to a child or in front of a child because children learn from observing and imitating people around them.
 - **Give** time and attention to your children.
 - **Make** your children feel safe, loved, protected and confident that their basic physical needs will be met.
3. **Control your anger.**
 - **Use the RETHINK model** to understand and control your anger.
 - **Learn** to recognize what makes children angry and frustrated.
 - **Notice** what happens to your body when you are angry.
 - **Keep** your attention on the present situation.
 - **Don't use** your children as scapegoats for your problems.
4. **Conflicts with others are a part of life.**
 - **Use the IDEAL model to resolve conflicts**
 - **Solve** your problems and disputes using words and not violence.
 - **Understand** the feelings and points of view of everybody involved in a conflict.

- **Show** by your example to your children how to resolve conflicts in positive ways without violence.
5. **Use nonviolent methods of discipline.**
- **The goal** of discipline is to teach good behaviors to children.
 - **Use** a few clear words to tell your children how they should behave.
 - **Define** clear simple rules and limits for behaviors and be consistent.
 - **Use methods of discipline** appropriate for the children's ages such as time-out, ignoring the behavior, teaching consequences of actions, and loss of privileges.

How to Become the Best Parent Possible

Join the APA *ACT/Parents Raising Safe Kids*, a program designed to help parents and caregivers create healthy and safe environments to protect children and youth from violence. The program is currently available in almost 50 communities all over the country and possibly near you.

The parenting meetings are fun and engaging; participants learn:

- about child development,
- how to understand and control anger,
- how to resolve conflicts in positive ways,
- how to use positive methods to discipline their children, and
- how to reduce their exposure to media violence.
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The materials are of excellent quality, friendly and affordable. Go to www.actagainstviolence.org to find a program site and team near you and to review the materials and publications. Get involved!