Indicators of Abuse

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Why does abuse occur? There are many reasons. For some, it may be retaliation for abuse sustained as a child. An abuser may abuse for fun, or because for them, violence is a way of life. There may be unresolved conflict between the abuser and victim. There can be a lack of financial resources or greed that may be the cause. Abusers may suffer themselves from mental or emotional problems, or drug and alcohol abuse.

In the case of a dependent adult who is not in a facility, victims may put up with abuse fearing that reporting the abuse may result in them being institutionalized. In both adults and children, perpetrators may also groom the victim by paying them special interest, giving them gifts, touches, massages, or demonstrate behavior like setting up time to be alone with the victim. Abusers can also include a well-intentioned, but overwhelmed caregiver, or a well-intentioned, but ignorant caregiver.

Remember in the denial of critical care category, the dependent adult themselves may be the one depriving themselves of the minimum food, shelter, clothing, supervision, physical or mental health care, or other care necessary to maintain their life or health. Environmental indicators you may see can include there being no food in the house, or finding food that is rotted or infested. There may be lack of proper food storage, such as no refrigerator, or there are inadequate cooking facilities or equipment. The dependent adult may wear clothes that are extremely dirty, or they may not be dressed appropriately for the weather. Their home may be dilapidated or in poor repair. They may have had utilities cut off or have a lack of heat in winter. There can be a lack of water or contaminated water. You may see a gross accumulation of garbage, papers, and clutter.

There are multiple physical and behavioral indicators that may serve as signs of possible abuse, and when seen, should be listed as evidence in your report. These indicators need to be evaluated in the context of the victim’s environment. The presence of one or more of these symptoms does not necessarily prove abuse. These are examples and are not all-inclusive.

Physical Indicators may include:

- Bruises and welts on the face, lips, mouth, torso, back, buttocks, or thighs in various stages of healing
- Bruises and welts in unusual patterns reflecting the shape of the article used, like an electric cord or belt buckle, or that occur in clusters indicating repeated contact
- Subdural hematomas, retinal hemorrhages, internal injuries
- Cigarette burns, especially on the soles, palms, backs, or buttocks
- Immersion burns which are sock-like, glove-like, or doughnut-shaped burns on buttocks or genitalia
- Burns patterned like an electrical element, iron, or utensil
- Rope burns on arms, legs, neck, or torso
• Fractures of the skull, nose, ribs or facial structure in various stages of healing
• Multiple, or in children, spiral fractures
• Bruises, burns, fractures, bite marks, loss of hair, or lacerations which are unexplained or which there are multiple stories for
• Consistent hunger, poor hygiene, inappropriate dress
• Consistent lack of supervision; abandonment
• Unattended physical or emotional problems or medical needs
• Difficulty in walking or sitting
• Pain or itching in the genital area
• Bruises, bleeding, or infection in the external genitalia, vaginal, or anal areas
• Torn, stained, or bloody underclothing
• Frequent urinary or yeast infections
• Venereal disease, especially in pre-teens

Potential behavior indicators of abuse in children can include:

• The child is afraid to go home or frightened of their parents
• The child is apprehensive when children cry or is overly concerned for siblings
• The child begs, steals, or hoards food
• The child exhibits behavioral extremes, such as aggressiveness or withdrawal
• There are complaints of soreness or uncomfortable movement, constant fatigue, listlessness, or falling asleep in class
• The child has delinquent, runaway, or truant behaviors
• The child is destructive, antisocial, or has neurotic traits or habit disorders
• There are developmental or language delays
• Excessive seductiveness or promiscuity
• Extreme aggression, rage, or hyperactivity
• The child displays fear of a person or an intense dislike of being left with someone
• They are frequently absent or tardy from school, or drop out of school, or have sudden school difficulties
• The child has indirect allusions to problems at home such as, “I want to live with you.”
• The child lags in growth or development
• They have poor peer relationships and are shunned by peers
• The child demonstrates unusual interest in or knowledge of sexual matters, or expressing affection in inappropriate ways
• The child is wary of adult contacts, has a lack of trust, or is uncomfortable with or threatened by physical contact or closeness

In both abused children and adults, behavioral indicators may include:

• A history of abuse or neglect provided by the victim
• They have inappropriate clothing for the weather
• You see massive weight change
• You see a lack of emotional control, withdrawal, chronic depression, hysteria, or fantasy
• There are multiple or inconsistent stories for a given injury
• They are overly compliant, passive, show undemanding behavior, or apathy
• They have poor self-esteem, self-devaluation, lack of confidence, or self-destructive behavior

As a mandatory reporter, you must be vigilant to notice what are sometimes subtle indicators of abuse.

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