

Understanding child neglect

We explain child neglect, what the signs are and how to help.



What is neglect?

When a child doesn't have their basic needs met by the people who are supposed to look after them it's called neglect.

- A child's needs may be similar across cultures, but how these needs are met might differ from one family to another
- Parenting behaviour can range from 'good enough' parenting through to an inability to provide for a child's basic needs
- Some parents may have difficulty providing for their children due to circumstances like poverty, addiction or mental illness

What are a child's basic needs?

There are several needs which affect a child's development and that need to be attended to by their parent or caregiver.

When these needs are not met, it can have lifelong physical, cognitive and emotional impacts.

Physical – shelter, food, clothing, hygiene, sleep

Affection – cuddles, kisses, holding, tenderness, patience

Security – consistent care, appropriate boundaries

Guidance – teaching life skills, instilling values

Independence – balancing protection and exploring

Responsibility – appropriate chores, involved in decisions

Stimulation – encouragement, praise, play

Approval – understanding and acceptance

Neglect is usually more than a one-off incident. It can build up over time and the behaviour may become normalised by the parent and child.

Types of neglect

Child neglect can occur across a number of different areas in a child's life. Neglect may include just one type, a few different types or all of them.

Supervisory neglect

Absence or inattention leading to harm

Abandonment

Child left for long periods of time

Medical neglect

Appropriate medical care not provided

Emotional neglect

Lack of warmth and emotional support

Educational neglect

Schooling needs unmet

Physical neglect

Not enough food, clothing, unsafe at home

The signs of neglect

It **may** indicate neglect if a child shows any of these signs:

Is frequently absent from school

Inadequate, worn out or dirty clothing

Living in unhygienic or unsafe conditions

May steal or beg for food, clothing, money

Extremely dirty, unwashed or have body odour

Frequently hungry, without food or malnourished

Is home alone for long periods without supervision

Untreated injuries, illness or physical conditions

Parent or carer is abusing alcohol or other substances

Parent or carer may appear indifferent toward to the child

Everybody has a part to play in protecting children from abuse and harm.

Who else can help?

If you have a reason to suspect a child is experiencing harm, or is at risk of experiencing harm, contact an authority in your State and talk to them about your concerns.

ACT - [Office for Children, Youth and Family Support](#)

NSW - [Family and Community Services \(FACS - formerly DOCS\)](#)

QLD - [Department of Child Safety](#)

SA - [Department of Child Protection](#)

TAS - [Department of Health and Human Services](#)

VIC - [Department of Human Services](#)

WA - [Department for Child Protection and Family Support](#)

NT - [Department of Children and Families](#)

We're here to help

Support is available

Encourage the child to [contact Kids Helpline](#) if they need some extra support to cope with what's happening.

If you would like to talk through your concerns with a counsellor, try calling [Parentline](#) in your state or territory for support.

For some guidance on responding to disclosures of child abuse, see our article on [Responding to child abuse](#).