

**COMMUNITY ACTION**

Know these signs of child abuse

APRIL 07, 2013 3:00 AM • [KIM PETERSON, SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN](#)

April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month. Now is the time to recognize that we all play a role in promoting the safety and well-being of children in our community. If you know or suspect that a child may be experiencing abuse or neglect, please contact your local law enforcement or child protective services agency. If you believe that a child is in immediate danger, dial 911 or call the New York State Child Abuse Prevention Hotline at (800) 342-3720. All calls are kept confidential.

Child abuse is defined as the severe mistreatment of a child by a parent, guardian or other adult responsible for the child's welfare. Child abuse is divided into four types — physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse and emotional maltreatment, although most children suffer more than one type of abuse. A physically abused child, for example, is often emotionally maltreated as well, and a sexually abused child may also be neglected.

Statistics show that each year, there are more than 3.3 million reports of child abuse in the United States. The impact is devastating, as victims face a higher risk of alcohol and drug problems, smoking, depression, experiencing further abuse, or becoming an abuser themselves.

Learning to recognize the signs of child abuse is the first step in helping an abused child now and in the future. According to Prevent Child Abuse America, there are numerous signs that may signal the presence of child abuse. The child may show sudden changes in behavior or school performance, and has not received help for physical or medical problems brought to the parents' attention. The child may have learning problems that cannot be attributed to specific physical or psychological causes and is always watchful, as though preparing for something bad to happen. The child may lack adult supervision and may be overly compliant, an overachiever, or too responsible, and does not want to be at home, often coming to school early and wanting to stay late. Children of any age may experience any type of child abuse; however, children older than 5 are more likely to be physically abused and to suffer moderate injury than are children younger than 5.

What signs should be considered if you suspect a child is suffering from physical abuse?

- The child has unexplained burns, bites, broken bones or black eyes
- The child may have fading bruises or other marks noticeable after an absence from school
- The child may seem frightened of the parents and protest and cry when it's time to go home from school
- The child may "shrink" at the approach of adults
- The child may report that a parent or another adult caregiver caused an injury

What if you suspect a child is being neglected? What signs should be considered?

- The child may frequently be absent from school
- The child may beg for or steal money or food from classmates or others
- The child's need for medical or dental care, immunizations or glasses is ignored by the parent or caregiver
- The child is consistently dirty, have severe body odor and lack sufficient clothing for the weather
- The child may abuse alcohol or other drugs
- The child states that there is no one at home to care for them

What about sexual abuse? What signs should you look for if you suspect a child is being sexually abused?

- The child may have difficulty walking or sitting
- The child may suddenly refuse to change for gym or participate in physical activities
- The child may demonstrate bizarre, sophisticated or unusual sexual knowledge or behavior
- The child may run away from home
- The child may report sexual abuse by a parent or another caregiver

What signs should be considered if you suspect a child is suffering from emotional maltreatment?

- The child may show extremes in behavior, such as overly compliant or demanding behavior, extreme passivity or aggression, and may report a lack of attachment to the parent
- The child may be inappropriately adult, (for example, parenting other children) or inappropriately infantile (head-banging or frequent rocking)
- The child may be delayed in physical or emotional development
- The child may have attempted suicide

Children need love, acceptance, positive guidance and protection to secure an early attachment to their parent. Infant care strategies, including breastfeeding, rocking, responding immediately to a crying baby and talking lovingly, promote the bonding and attachment needed to strengthen a nurturing relationship between the parent and the child. Being nurtured and developing a bond with a caring adult at a very early age affects all aspects of a child's behavior and development. Children develop trust that their parents will provide for them when the parent and the child have strong, warm feelings for each other.

"Protective factors" are conditions in families and communities that increase the health and well-being of children and families. They serve as buffers, working with and helping parents who might be at risk of abusing their children to find resources and supports that allow them to parent effectively, even under stress. Research has shown that these protective factors are linked to a lower incidence of child abuse and neglect. Currently, statistics show that home visitation is the most innovative child abuse prevention program. Intensive home visiting is considered a protective factor and is effective in identifying family strengths and needs and providing ongoing support and the most up-to-date parenting information to the at-risk family. Home visitors make a wide range of

community and professional services available to the family to assist parents in reducing family stress to help prevent child abuse and neglect.

Cayuga Seneca Community Action Agency's Healthy Families Cayuga/Seneca is a free and voluntary program that provides support and information to new and expectant parents in Cayuga and Seneca counties. If you would like more information about Healthy Families Cayuga/Seneca, or if you are pregnant or know a pregnant woman or a family with a newborn younger than 3 months of age who may be interested in the program, please contact us at 283-2030 in Cayuga County or 539-5647 in Seneca County.