

What is Child Abuse?

Harm from abuse is not always straightforward to identify and a child or young person may experience more than one type of harm or significant harm.

Harm can be caused by:

- Physical abuse;
- Sexual abuse;
- Emotional abuse;
- Neglect

In the Republic of Ireland Child Abuse is defined by Children First: National Guidance for the Protection & Welfare of Children

Physical: Physical abuse of a child is that which results in actual or potential physical harm from an interaction or lack of interaction, which is reasonably within the control of a parent or person in a position of responsibility, power or trust. There may be single or repeated incidents.

Neglect: Neglect can be defined in terms of an omission, where the child suffers significant harm or impairment of development by being deprived of food, clothing, warmth, hygiene and safety, attachment to and affection from adults, and/or medical care. The threshold of significant harm is reached when the child's needs are neglected to the extent that his or her well-being and/or development are severely affected.

Sexual: Sexual Abuse occurs when a child is used by another person for his or her gratification or sexual arousal, or for that of others

Emotional: Emotional abuse is normally to be found in the relationship between a parent/carer and a child rather than in a specific event or pattern of events. It occurs when a child's developmental need for affection, approval, consistency and security are not met. Unless other forms of abuse are present, it is rarely manifested in terms of physical signs or symptoms.

In Northern Ireland Child Abuse is defined Cooperating to Safeguard Children and Young People 2016:

Harm from abuse is not always straightforward to identify and a child or young person may experience more than one type of harm or significant harm.

Harm can be caused by:

- Physical abuse;
- Sexual abuse;
- Emotional abuse;
- Neglect;
- and Exploitation.

Explanatory notes

You will notice the additional definition of exploitation to the original four definitions, please see the more detailed definition at the end of this document. Although ‘exploitation’ is not included in the categories of registration for the Child Protection Register (CPR1), professionals should recognise that the abuse resulting from or caused by the exploitation of children and young people can be categorised within the existing four categories as children who have been exploited may have suffered from physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, sexual abuse or a combination of these forms of abuse. The focus for professional judgements should be on the harm children may experience and the threshold for decision making is evidence based. The new definitions have a preventative approach which allows for earlier response. The term “young people” has been included in the amended title to reflect that young people also require protection from harm and abuse – this is a ‘considered’ change as, although the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 defines ‘child’ as anyone under 18 years of age, young people in their response to the Marshall Inquiry consultation emphatically ‘advised’ that referring to them as children distanced them and encouraged them to distance themselves from their identification as ‘children’ and diminished the relevance of the key issue/messages for them.

Physical Abuse is deliberately physically hurting a child. It might take a variety of different forms, including hitting, biting, pinching, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning or suffocating a child.

Sexual Abuse occurs when others use and exploit children sexually for their own gratification or gain or the gratification of others. Sexual abuse may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape, or oral sex) or nonpenetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside clothing. It may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in the production of sexual images, forcing children to look at sexual images or watch sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways or grooming a child in preparation for abuse (including via e-technology). Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children.

Emotional Abuse is the persistent emotional maltreatment of a child. It is also sometimes called psychological abuse and it can have severe and persistent adverse effects on a child’s emotional development. Emotional abuse may involve deliberately telling a child that they are worthless, or unloved and inadequate. It may include not giving a child opportunities to express their views, deliberately silencing them, or ‘making fun’ of what they say or how they communicate. Emotional abuse may involve bullying – including online bullying through social networks, online games or mobile phones – by a child’s peers.

Explanatory note

In relation to the inclusion of ‘bullying’ DHSSPS are clear that bullying is an act (an ‘abuse’ of one person by another or a group) and that the impact/consequence for the bullied child is one of ‘harm’ (including emotional ‘harm’). The intention of including this term was to more clearly delineate between the act (abuse) and the impact/consequence for the child (harm). There was no intention to introduce an additional category of Child Protection Registration on the basis that appropriate ‘registration’ can be completed within the current registration criteria of – neglect, physical, sexual, emotional and multiple abuse – and the three statuses – potential, suspected and confirmed.

Neglect is the failure to provide for a child's basic needs, whether it be adequate food, clothing, hygiene, supervision or shelter that is likely to result in the serious impairment of a child's health or development. Children who are neglected often also suffer from other types of abuse.

Explanatory note

Note that the use of the term "persistent" has been removed from the definition of Neglect. This has been done to reflect that the neglect of a child does not have to be persistent for that neglect to be serious, life-threatening or in some instances result in the death of a child from a single incident of neglect (of attending to the child's welfare needs). This is reflective of a number of high profile cases, heavily reported in the media where examples include;-

- A mother abandoning her young children in the care of their 12 year old sibling before going off on holiday abroad for a fortnight with her new boyfriend
- A mother leaving a child in a car on an extremely hot day while she went to the pub drinking with a male friend; police had to break the window into the car to rescue the child effectively saving its life.
- A mother taking a drinks-and-drugs cocktail before falling asleep with an infant baby in front of her adjacent to a gas fire. Such instances have 'educated' the thinking that a multi-disciplinary Case Conference should not need to prove 'persistence' to be able to include a child's name on the CPR in an effort to identify them as a child at risk of abuse. It is for the Courts to determine the level and extent of 'abuse' that needs to be proved on-the-balance-of-probabilities to reach the threshold for the making of an Order in Public Law proceedings or for a criminal court to decide that a case has been established beyond-reasonable-doubt to secure a conviction.

Exploitation is the intentional ill-treatment, manipulation or abuse of power and control over a child or young person; to take selfish or unfair advantage of a child or young person or situation, for personal gain. It may manifest itself in many forms such as child labour, slavery, servitude, engagement in criminal activity, begging, benefit or other financial fraud or child trafficking. It extends to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of children for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation can be sexual in nature.