Important Facts

Child abuse and neglect is defined as causing non-accidental injury or not providing for a child’s basic needs. About 3 million reports are filed every year on children that someone suspects may have been abused or neglected. It is unusual for a child that is not walking yet to sustain a lot of bruises, burns or other physical injuries. You should have a high level of concern if you see these in a child and call the child’s healthcare provider.

Child sexual abuse is any use of a child for the sexual gratification of an adult. This includes touching a child’s genitals, making a child touch someone else’s genitals, pornography, and exposing a person’s genitals to a child.

Domestic violence is closely related to child abuse. Millions of children witness domestic violence every day. The risk of these children being abused doubles if the mother is being battered. Girls raised in violent homes are at risk for becoming victims of violence as they grow older, while boys are at risk for growing up to be aggressive and violent. Many times the abuser does not intend to hurt the child. Often, they are a loving parent or caregiver who loses control and has unrealistic expectations of the child. Child abuse and violence happens on every level of society. However, it tends to be more frequent in homes that have a lot of stressors.

It also is important to know that the majority of children who are sexually or physically abused are violated by someone they know, often being one of their caretakers.

How You Can Protect Your Children and Adolescents

• There are some behavioral signs in children that may indicate a child is being abused. However, some of these can be the result of other stressors in a child’s life. Any one sign doesn’t mean the child is being abused, but the presence of several of these signs should raise concern.

• Appetite changes
• Nightmares/change in sleeping habits
• Mood swings including aggression (especially if child is hurting other people or animals), depression, anxiety, or self-mutilation
• Suicidal ideation
• Provocative behavior
• Extreme fears
• Regression of behavior
• Alcohol/drug abuse
• School problems
• Frequent complaints of headaches, stomachaches, or other illnesses that seem to be excessive and lacks a medical foundation

In addition to behavior signs, here are some physical signs to alert you:

• Frequent bruising, especially in a young infant or on the face, chest, back, or genitals
• Pain, extreme redness, discharge, or lesions in the genital region
• Injuries/fractures that are inconsistent with the description of the injury
• Poor weight gain, excessive weight gain, inappropriate clothing, no medical care for a child

If you are concerned about any behavioral or physical signs of abuse, please call your primary care provider. He or she can guide you through the process of how to figure everything out.

• It is important to teach children about safety and protecting themselves as they get older. Here are some things that you and your family can do to prevent abuse:

• Adults must watch for signs of abuse as young children cannot protect themselves.
• Be alert to changes in their behavior and discuss it with them.
• Teach your children how and when to say “no.” They need to know that they can say no if someone makes them uncomfortable or scared.
• Set privacy boundaries within your family.
• Teach children that special secrets about touching or physical harm are not okay.
• Teach children the correct names of body parts.
• Make sure to keep the lines of communication open. LISTEN AND TALK to your children and adolescents all the time. Make sure they know they can talk to you.
• Do not confuse children with the “stranger danger” concept. This message is not effective, as danger to children is greater from someone they know.
• Screen all caregivers carefully, such as babysitters, day care providers, and coaches.
• Teach your children and adolescents how to get out of a threatening situation. Make a family safety plan!
• Supervise Internet use -- many sexual predators use this to connect with children.
• Make arrangements ahead of time to be available for your children when they go out with friends. They need to know they can call you for a ride if they find themselves in an uncomfortable position or if they have used substances and feel unsafe to drive home.
• Always report anything suspicious.

Be a parent that is involved in your children’s lives. Take the time to listen to your children, which will help them to develop their sense of security. Communication is key. Also, find ways to help yourself if you are feeling stressed. Remember, your stress affects your children.