



# Recognizing Child Abuse

Improve your practice and children's lives.

Is your office staff trained to recognize the signs of child abuse and neglect? If not, it's time to learn what conditions are the result of abuse or neglect, which conditions mimic these signs, and how you can intervene when necessary.

## What Is Child Abuse?

Laws and definitions vary from state to state. But most define it as "non-accidental physical, sexual, or emotional injuries or trauma inflicted on a minor child by a parent or other caregiver."<sup>1</sup> Child neglect can be more difficult to diagnose, yet it is ten times more common. A general definition is the *willing* "failure to provide adequate care, support, nutrition, shelter, and medical or other care necessary for a child's health and well-being."<sup>1</sup>

It is important to remember that child abuse and neglect are not limited to a certain socioeconomic set. Victims come from all ethnic, geographic, and economic backgrounds. It's likely that most dental practices have seen neglected or abused children but may not have properly identified those victims.<sup>1</sup>

## Why the Dental Practice?

Between 50 and 75 percent of abused children suffer injuries to the mouth, head, and face.<sup>1</sup> And though most abusive parents may switch physicians regularly—out of fear the doctors will discover the abuse—they usually return to the same dentist.<sup>1</sup>

All dentists are required by law to report suspected cases, as are dental hygienists in most states. However, all members of the dental team should be trained to recognize the signs.

## Once You Suspect Abuse or Neglect

If you suspect child abuse or neglect, follow these steps:

- 1 Document: Keep careful records of your findings.
- 2 Enlist a Witness: Have another staff member confirm and note your findings and sign the records.
- 3 Report: Call Child Protective Services or other area law enforcement agency, as state law requires. Be sure your patient gets the proper dental care during the visit, then file the report as soon as possible. Have the following information on hand before calling:
  - Parents' or custodians' names and address
  - Patient's age
  - Siblings' names
  - Patient's condition, including injuries and disabilities
  - Any other information, including suspected abuser's identity

## Dentist-Patient Protocol

To improve awareness of abuse and neglect symptoms, follow a protocol similar to this one:

- 1 Conduct a general physical assessment along with the oral exam. Notice difficulties sitting or walking.
- 2 Notice a patient's behavior. Apprehension and fear are not the only signs of possible abuse. Look for eagerness to please, as well. Measure behavior against that of similarly mature patients.
- 3 Get histories of injuries from the patient and parent—separately, if possible. If you are taking x-rays, this could be an opportunity to question the patient. However, never use an x-ray as an excuse to separate patient from caregiver, as this can open your practice up to liability. Compare patient and parental accounts and note discrepancies.
- 4 Conduct the orofacial exam. Look for facial injuries, bruises, and any other injuries inconsistent with history. Look for oral signs of sexually transmitted diseases. Use your judgment to determine when common facial and other injuries are just the lumps and bumps of childhood.
- 5 Know the diseases that can mimic child abuse. A good health history can help you identify these conditions, which include:
  - a. Hemophilia
  - b. Idiopathic thrombocytopenia purpura (ITP)
  - c. Sturge-Weber syndrome
  - d. Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome
  - e. Epidermolysis bullosa
  - f. Menke's Syndrome
  - g. Slate-gray spots in infancy (in early texts referred to as Mongolian spots)
  - h. Birthmarks

Folk medicine remedies like coin rubbing and cupping can also cause marks on the skin that are not abusive.

- 6 Suspect bruises, welts, and injuries to the face, lips, mouth, neck, ankles, and wrist, if visible. Bilateral injuries are always suspect, as most accidents happen on one side. Look for "pattern" injuries; that is, notice grab marks or hand prints, burns, and bite marks.
- 7 If you suspect child abuse or neglect, you may wish to consult with the patient's physician. However, this does not negate the mandate for you to report (see front sidebar).

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1 "The Dental Team's Role in Identifying and Preventing Family Violence," Lynn Douglas Mouden, DDS, MPH, FICD, FACD, September 2018.

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