

Boy Scouts of America Youth Protection Guidelines Questions and Answers

What is child abuse?

Generally speaking, child abuse is injury of a child by an adult or older child that might not be intentional, but is not accidental. It is usually classified as physical abuse, emotional abuse, or sexual abuse. Harm caused by withholding life's necessities—food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education—is called neglect.

How can I tell if a child has been abused?

Each child reacts to abuse differently. In physical abuse, injuries to the child might be evident, but with any kind of abuse, children often give only behavioral clues. You should be alert to changes in the child's behavior. Any abrupt change in behavior that is maintained for a week or longer indicates that the child may be reacting to stress that could stem from a variety of causes—including child abuse.

Childhood stress can result from any upsetting situation in the child's environment such as family disruption, death of a pet, or even a move to a new neighborhood. It can also be a result of child abuse. If a child abruptly changes his behavior for more than a few days in a manner that you feel is inappropriate, you might want to ask the child if something is wrong or if you can help. Do not immediately jump to the conclusion that the child has been abused.

Signs of stress may include mood swings, acting out, changes in sleep patterns, or bed-wetting. Some children experience physical effects, including stomachaches and headaches. Others have trouble concentrating or completing schoolwork. Still others become withdrawn or spend a lot of time alone. Younger children may show signs of reacting to stress by picking up new habits like thumb sucking, hair twirling, or nose picking; older children may begin to lie, bully, or defy authority.

Some of the specific signs for each kind of abuse are listed below:

- *Physical Abuse*—A child who has been physically abused might exhibit suspicious injuries. Accidental injuries normally associated with childhood “wear and tear” are generally on the knees, elbows, shins, and chin. Injuries that may indicate physical abuse include burns, bruises, lacerations and abrasions, and fractures.

Burns that might indicate a child has been abused include cigarette or cigar burns on the soles of the feet, the palms of the hands, the back, or the genital areas. Other burns associated with abuse are friction or tether burns on the wrists, ankles, or around the neck caused by ropes used to tie the child. Wet burns on the hands and feet that appear to be *glove-like* or *sock-like* are caused by forcing the child to bathe in water that is too hot. Dry burns leave distinctive marks in the shape of the instrument used to inflict them. Commonly, in child abuse cases, these include electric irons, radiator grates, and stove burners.

Bruises of different colors, indicating infliction at different times and in different stages of healing, often indicate abuse. This is particularly true if the bruises are on the abdomen, back, or face. Bruises, like burns, also might have distinctive shapes indicating the weapon used to inflict them.

When children have lacerations and abrasions in soft tissue areas, such as on the abdomen, back, backs of arms and legs, or external genitalia, it is a strong indicator of physical abuse. Human bite marks, especially when they are recurrent and appear to be adult-sized, are also strongly indicative of abuse.

Unexplained fractures are cause for concern. A child with multiple fractures is almost certain to be a victim of abuse. Other signs include swollen or tender limbs and spiral fractures caused by jerking of the arms.

- *Emotional Abuse*—The indicators of emotional abuse are hard to detect. Some visible signs are lagging physical development and habit disorders such as thumb sucking or rocking. Any of the signs associated with childhood stress may be present.
- *Neglect*—As with emotional abuse, the signs of neglect are usually very subtle and hard to detect. A neglected child might show up at Scout meetings inappropriately dressed, lacking in personal hygiene, and consistently hungry.
- *Sexual Abuse*—Perhaps the best evidence that a child has been sexually abused is that the abuse is witnessed—if not by yourself, then by another individual. Another excellent indication is that the child says that he has been abused. Again, oftentimes this information may not come from the child himself but from another source.

Physical evidence of sexual abuse, if present at all, tends to be temporary. These signs include difficulty in walking; torn, stained, or bloody underwear; pain or itching in the genital area; bruises or bleeding of the external genitalia; and sexually transmitted diseases.

The behavioral signs of sexual abuse are likely to be more conspicuous and present longer. Specific behaviors related to child sexual abuse are an age-inappropriate understanding of sex; reluctance to be left alone with a particular person; persistent and inappropriate sex play with peers or toys; prostitution; wearing lots of clothing, especially to bed; drawings of genitalia; fear of touch; abuse of animals; masturbation in public; nightmares or night terrors; apprehension when the subject of sexual abuse is brought up; and cross-dressing.

The presence of any of these behaviors indicates a possibility that sexual abuse has occurred. They are not, in and of themselves, conclusive evidence that the child has been abused.

What should I do if I notice any of these signs?

First, you should not jump to any conclusions. The signs of child abuse are often ambiguous; they can mean something other than child abuse. Consider stating your observations to the child's parents. For example, you could say, "For the past two weeks, Johnny has been very disruptive at den meeting. He is very aggressive with the other

boys and uses foul language. This behavior is very unlike him. I hope that everything is OK.”

You should not make any accusations to the parents that the child is being abused. Even if you file a report with the Scout executive or the authorities because you suspect child abuse, you should not make accusations or state your suspicions to others who are not responsible for determining if abuse is occurring.

What should I do if I suspect that a child is being abused?

If you suspect or hear that a child in the Scouting program is being abused, you must contact your Scout executive. He has already established contacts with the child protective services and law enforcement agencies in your area. He will be able to tell you what you should do. In many states you are also required to report your suspicions to Child Protective Services. If you suspect that a child who is not a Scout is being abused, you should contact your local child abuse hotline. Generally the telephone number to report child abuse is listed in the white pages under “child abuse.”

What if I am not sure that the child is being abused?

The law requires only that you have a reasonable suspicion that a child is being abused. Once a report has been made, the appropriate agency will investigate and determine if abuse can be substantiated. Unless you make a report, the child might remain in grave danger.

How can I tell if a person is a child molester?

Child molesters, individuals who sexually abuse children, do not necessarily fit the common stereotypes that we hold—e.g., strangers, dirty old men, mentally disabled, etc. There is no test or other screening mechanism that will identify a child molester prior to them committing an offense. Child molesters come from all walks of life, all social and ethnic groups, and all occupational categories. Child molesters might have positions of prominence in their communities. The vast majority of molesters are known by the children they victimize and might have a position of authority over children, such as a teacher, clergy member, youth group worker, or police officer.

How can we protect our children from child molesters?

Child molesters often try to gain access to children through legitimate means such as becoming involved in youth activities. They use this access to identify children who they perceive to be vulnerable to sexual abuse. They will try to create a situation in which the child and the molester are isolated from observation and supervision of others. To protect our children, we must establish and maintain open lines of communication so that they feel free to report any inappropriate or worrisome contact with adults or older children. We also must educate our children to enable them to understand what abuse is and that they have the right to resist any inappropriate contact.

How does the BSA prevent child abuse in Scouting?

The Boy Scouts of America has adopted a number of policies aimed at eliminating opportunities for abuse within the Scouting program. These policies focus on leadership selection and on placing barriers to abuse within the program.

Leadership—The Boy Scouts of America takes great pride in the quality of our adult leadership. Being a leader in the BSA is a privilege, not a right. The quality of the program and the safety of our youth members call for high-quality adult leaders. We work closely with our chartered organizations to help recruit the best possible leaders for their units. The adult application requests background information that should be checked by the unit committee or the chartered organization before accepting an applicant for unit leadership.

No current screening techniques exist that can identify every potential child molester. We can reduce the risk of accepting a child molester by learning all we can about an applicant for a leadership position—his or her experience with children, why he or she wants to be a Scout leader, and what discipline techniques he or she would use. In addition every new registered leader is subject to a criminal history record check to determine if he or she has been convicted of a crime that could place children at risk.

Barriers to Abuse Within Scouting

The BSA has adopted the following policies to provide additional security for our members. These policies are primarily for the protection of our youth members; however, they also serve to protect our adult leaders from false accusations of abuse.

- *Two-deep leadership*—Two registered adult leaders or one registered leader and a parent of a participant, one of whom must be 21 years of age or older, are required on all trips and outings. The chartered organization is responsible for ensuring that sufficient leadership is provided for all activities.
- *No one-on-one contact*—One-on-one contact between adults and youth members is not permitted. In situations that require personal conferences, such as a Scoutmaster's conference, the meeting is to be conducted in view of other adults and youths.
- *Respect of privacy*—Adult leaders must respect the privacy of youth members in situations such as changing clothes and taking showers at camp, and intrude only to the extent that health and safety require. Adults must protect their own privacy in similar situations.
- *Separate accommodations*—When camping, no youth is permitted to sleep in the tent of an adult other than his own parent or guardian. Councils are strongly encouraged to have separate shower and latrine facilities for females. When separate facilities are not available, separate times for male and female use should be scheduled and posted.
- *Proper preparation for high-adventure activities*—Activities with elements of risk should never be undertaken without proper preparation, equipment, clothing, supervision, and safety measures.
- *No secret organizations*—The Boy Scouts of America does not recognize any secret organizations as part of its program. All aspects of the Scouting program are open to observation by parents and leaders.
- *Appropriate attire*—Proper clothing for activities is required. For example, skinny-dipping is not appropriate as part of Scouting.
- *Constructive discipline*—Discipline used in Scouting should be constructive and reflect Scouting's values. Corporal punishment is never permitted.
- *Hazing prohibited*—Physical hazing and initiations are prohibited and may not be

- included as part of any Scouting activity.
- *Junior leader training and supervision*—Adult leaders must monitor and guide the leadership techniques used by junior leaders and ensure that BSA policies are followed.

How can parents help protect their children?

Parents participate in the protection of their children in a variety of ways. We have already mentioned the need for open lines of communication so that children are encouraged to bring any troubles to their parents for advice and counsel. In addition, parents need to be involved in their sons' Scouting activities. All parents receive important information concerning the Scouting program as part of their sons' membership applications. This information is provided so parents can detect any deviations from the BSA's approved program. If any deviations are noted, parents should call these to the attention of the chartered organization or the unit committee. If the problems persist, parents should contact the local council for assistance.

Parents also need to review the booklet, ***How to Protect Your Children from Child Abuse: A Parent's Guide***, inserted in every Boy Scout and Cub Scout handbook. The requirements to join a Boy Scout troop or to receive a Bobcat badge include parents and Scouts completing the exercises in the booklet.

Why do most child victims of sexual abuse keep the abuse secret?

A victim of child sexual abuse is under a great deal of pressure to keep the abuse secret. In many cases of child molestation, the molester has threatened to harm the child or a member of the child's family. The molester might have told the child that he would not be believed even if the child did tell. Another common situation is that the molester will tell the child that if the child tells about the abuse, he will get into trouble. The clear message is given to the child that if another person finds out, something bad will happen to the child. This pressure to maintain silence can often be successfully overcome by establishing open communication between children and adults through a proper educational program for children.

What should I do if a child tells me he has been sexually abused?

How an adult responds to a child when he tries to disclose abuse can influence the outcome of the child's victimization. By maintaining an apparent calm, the adult can help reassure the child that everything is going to be OK. By not criticizing the child, we counteract any statements the molester made to the victim about the child getting into trouble. Reassure the child that you are concerned about what happened to him and you would like to get him some help. Allegations by a Scout concerning abuse in the program must be reported to the Scout executive. Since these reports are required, the child should be told that you have to tell the proper authorities but that you will not tell anyone else. It is important that you not tell anyone other than the Scout executive or the child protective services agency about allegations of abuse; if the allegations cannot be substantiated, you could be sued for defamation of character.

How do I know what my reporting responsibilities are?

Every state, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. territories have different reporting requirements. As part of this training, you have received reporting instructions for your area and for your council. People are often concerned about being sued for reporting child abuse. You are not required to know for certain that a child has been abused. All that the law requires is that you have a reasonable suspicion and are reporting in “good faith.” When these requirements are met, all states provide immunity from liability for child abuse reporters.

What educational materials does the BSA have for youth members?

The BSA produced separate age-appropriate materials for use in Cub Scouting, Boy Scouting, and Venturing. The video for Cub Scouts, *It Happened to Me*, should be used annually by packs or dens, but only for Cub Scouts accompanied by a parent or other adult family member. The video for Boy Scouts, *A Time to Tell*, introduces the “three Rs” of Youth Protection, and should be viewed by troops annually. The video for use in the Venturing program is *Youth Protection: Personal Safety Awareness*. It addresses peer sexual harassment, acquaintance rape, Internet safety, and stalking.

How can Scout leaders who are not social workers teach children about youth protection?

The BSA recognizes that many of our leaders feel unprepared to talk to children about preventing sexual abuse. For this reason, the BSA has meeting guides for all of the videos produced to be viewed by youths. The guides address everything from scheduling the meeting, contacting the police or social services for assistance, and notifying parents (a sample letter is provided) to questions and answers for discussion after the video has been viewed.

What are the “three Rs” of Youth Protection?

The “three Rs” of Youth Protection convey a simple message that the BSA wants its youth members to learn to

- *Recognize* situations that place him at risk of being molested, how child molesters operate, and that anyone could be a molester.
- *Resist* unwanted and inappropriate attention. Resistance will stop most attempts at molestation.
- *Report* attempted or actual molestation to a parent or other trusted adult. This prevents further abuse of himself and helps to protect other children. Let the Scout know he will not be blamed for what occurred.