What is child abuse?

Child abuse is broadly defined in many states as any type of cruelty inflicted upon a child, including mental abuse, physical harm, neglect, and sexual abuse or exploitation. Federal legislation lays the groundwork for states by identifying a minimum set of acts or behaviors that define child abuse and neglect. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), (42 U.S.C.A. §5106g), as amended by the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003, defines child abuse and neglect as, at minimum:

“Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (CAPTA 2010).

What are the different types of child abuse?

In general, states recognize four major types of maltreatment: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect (Crosson-Tower 2003, 13).
PHYSICAL ABUSE
Physical abuse includes any non-accidental physical injury (ranging from minor bruises to severe fractures or death) caused by the child’s parent, caretaker, or other person who has responsibility for the child. It may include injuries sustained from beating, kicking, shaking, punching, choking, throwing, burning, stabbing, or otherwise harming a child. The injury is always considered abuse. Although the injury may not be an accident per se, it is also not necessarily intended by the child’s caretaker. Physical abuse may result from extreme discipline, from punishment inappropriate to the child’s age or condition, or from a parent’s recurrent lapses in self-control brought on by immaturity, stress, or alcohol or illicit drug use. It is important to note that non-accidental injury inflicted by someone other than a parent, guardian, relative, or other caregiver (i.e., a stranger), is considered a criminal act and is addressed by law enforcement and not child protective services.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE
Emotional (or psychological) abuse is a pattern of behavior that impairs a child’s emotional development or sense of self-worth. Emotional maltreatment includes blaming, belittling, or rejecting a child; constantly treating siblings unequally; and a persistent lack of concern by the caretaker for the child’s welfare. While symptoms of emotional maltreatment are most often observed through behavior, it is possible for children to internalize it so sufficiently as to cause developmental lags, psychosomatic symptoms, and other visible effects, such as speech disorders. Emotional abuse is almost always present when other forms of abuse are identified.

SEXUAL ABUSE
Sexual abuse is defined as inappropriate adolescent or adult sexual behavior with a child. It includes fondling a child’s genitals, making the child fondle an adult’s genitals, intercourse, incest, rape, sodomy, exhibitionism, sexual exploitation, or exposure to pornography. Sexual abuse may be committed by a person under age 18 when that person is either significantly older than the victim or is in a position of power or control over the child. Sexual abuse may take place within the family, by a parent’s boyfriend or girlfriend, or at the hands of adult caretakers outside the family — for example, a family friend or babysitter. Contrary to the myth that most abuse is committed by strangers, the adults who sexually abuse children most often know and have a relationship with the child.
NEGLECT
Neglect involves the caregiver’s inattention to the child’s basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, medical care, supervision, and education. Neglectful families are often multi-problem families, although families with numerous problems are not always neglectful. Unlike physical abuse, which tends to be episodic, neglect tends to be chronic, and neglected children may grow up believing that this is a normal way of life and will not seek assistance or confide this information to anyone.

Why is child abuse detection and prevention important?
The impact of child maltreatment can be profound. It is well-documented that children who have been abused or neglected are more likely to experience adverse outcomes throughout their lives in a number of areas:

- poor physical health (e.g., chronic fatigue, altered immune function, hypertension, sexually transmitted diseases, obesity);
- poor emotional and mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, eating disorders, suicidal thoughts and attempts, post-traumatic stress disorder);
- social difficulties (e.g., insecure attachments with caregivers, which may lead to difficulty developing trusting relationships with peers and adults later in life);
- cognitive dysfunction (e.g., deficits in attention, abstract reasoning, language development, and problem-solving skills, which ultimately affect academic achievement and school performance);
- high-risk health behaviors (e.g., a higher number of lifetime sexual partners, younger age at first voluntary intercourse, teen pregnancy, alcohol and substance abuse); and
- behavioral problems (e.g., aggression, juvenile delinquency, adult criminality, abusive or violent behavior) (Putnam 2006, Goldman et al 2003, Hagele 2005, Crosson-Tower 2010).

Child abuse and neglect also affect various service delivery systems that respond to incidents and support the victims, including physical and mental health, law enforcement, judicial and public social services, and nonprofit agencies. One recent analysis of the immediate and long-term economic impact of child abuse and neglect suggests that child maltreatment costs the nation more than $284 million each day, or approximately $104 billion each year (Wang and Holton 2007).
What is the role of educators?

Educators are trained to recognize and intervene when children are not able to benefit fully from their educational opportunities. This training makes them uniquely qualified to detect indicators that may signify that a child is being maltreated in some way. Since schools are one of the few places in which children are seen almost daily, educators have a chance to see changes in appearance and behavior. Everyone — from classroom teachers to guidance counselors, social workers, nurses, psychologists, and school administrators — becomes an integral part of the educational team to help children.

Each state defines child abuse and neglect in its statutes and policies, and every state legally mandates that educators report suspected child abuse and neglect. A mandated reporter is anyone required by state law to report maltreatment (or suspected maltreatment) to the designated state child protective services (CPS) agency. While some states clearly define principals, teachers, school nurses, and guidance personnel as included in this mandate, other states designate all school personnel as mandated reporters. In addition, every state levies penalties against mandated reporters who choose not to report.

Listings of all 50 state agencies designated to receive and investigate reports of suspected child abuse and neglect, along with their websites and toll-free telephone numbers, are available from a number of sources. For example, the Child Welfare Information Gateway, a website maintained by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, maintains a current list at the following address: www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslistfl_dsp.cfm?rs_id=5&rate_chno=W-00082.