



Parenting Children and Youth Who Have Experienced Abuse or Neglect

Children and youth who have been abused or neglected need safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments to recover from the trauma they've experienced. If you are parenting a child or youth with a history of abuse or neglect, you might have questions about the impacts and how you can help your child heal. This factsheet is intended to help parents (birth, foster, and adoptive) and other caregivers better understand the challenges of caring for a child or youth who has experienced maltreatment and learn about available resources for support.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Child abuse and neglect
and its effects

How can I help my child
or youth heal?

Developing caring
discipline techniques

Where can I find
support?

Conclusion

Child Abuse and Neglect and Its Effects

Knowing about abuse and neglect (also known as child maltreatment) and their effects will help you respond to the needs of your child or youth while building trust, a sense of safety, and support in your relationship. How you respond to your child's maltreatment will depend on what you know about his or her history and the type of abuse or neglect experienced. The first step toward understanding how to best parent your child or youth is learning what child maltreatment is.

Child maltreatment falls into four main groups:

- *Physical abuse* refers to a nonaccidental physical injury (from hitting, kicking, or burning, for example) caused by a parent, caregiver, or trusted adult with whom the child has regular contact, such as a teacher, babysitter, or coach.
- *Sexual abuse* refers to forcing or coercing a child or youth to engage in sexual activity, including exploitation through pornography.
- *Emotional abuse* is a pattern of behavior that hurts the emotional development or sense of self-worth of a child or youth (for example, constant criticism, threats, or sarcasm; belittling, shaming, or withholding love).
- *Neglect* is the failure of a parent or caregiver to protect a child or youth from harm or provide basic needs (for example, food, shelter, supervision, medical care, education, or emotional nurturing).

For more information on types of child abuse and neglect, see the following Child Welfare Information Gateway publication:

- *Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect* (State statutes): <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/define/>

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html>), children and youth who have experienced abuse or neglect are at higher risk for poor long-term health, impaired mental health, and negative social consequences than those who have not experienced child maltreatment. Examples of poor health outcomes include high blood pressure, delays in physical and emotional development, depression or anxiety, and attachment disorders. Abuse or neglect can impair healthy development by negatively affecting the way a child's brain develops. Maltreatment can delay or alter how he or she is able to process information and respond emotionally, see right from wrong, anticipate the consequences of actions, and learn from mistakes. The effects of maltreatment can be long-term, occur immediately or years after the abuse, and may depend on several factors, including the following:

- The age of the child or youth at the time of the abuse or neglect
- Whether the maltreatment happened once or was ongoing
- Who abused or neglected the child or youth (for example, a parent or other caregiver)
- Whether a nurturing person was in the child or youth's life
- The type and severity of the maltreatment

For more detailed information on the effects of child abuse and neglect, see the following Information Gateway publications:

- *Long-Term Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect* (factsheet): <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/long-term-consequences/>
- *Understanding the Effects of Maltreatment on Brain Development* (issue brief): <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue-briefs/brain-development/>

While child abuse and neglect can leave physical and emotional scars, it can also cause trauma and toxic stress. Trauma occurs when someone directly experiences injury or threat of injury or witnesses an event that threatens or causes serious harm to themselves or a loved one. According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, toxic stress can occur when a child lacks a supportive parent or other adult and experiences strong, frequent, or ongoing adversity, such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance use or mental illness, or exposure to violence (see <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>). Responses to trauma experienced by children and youth may vary; some children may be reluctant to trust, some may act out, and some may withdraw from family and friends.

For more information about trauma, see the following Information Gateway resources:

- *Helping Your Child Heal From Trauma* (tip sheet): <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/preventionmonth/resources/tip-sheets/>
- *Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma* (factsheet): <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/child-trauma/>

Other Resources on Child Abuse and Neglect and Its Effects

The American Academy of Pediatrics' guide, *Parenting After Trauma: Understanding Your Child's Needs: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents*: <http://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/healthy-foster-care-america/Documents/FamilyHandout.pdf>

ZERO TO THREE's *Healthy Minds: Nurturing Your Child's Development* handouts with information about supporting healthy brain development in the first 3 years of life: <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/series/healthy-minds-nurturing-your-child-s-development>

How Can I Help My Child or Youth Heal?

This section explores strategies for helping your child or youth build resilience after experiencing abuse or neglect. It also discusses protective factors and capacities that parents can develop to help prevent future child maltreatment or retraumatization.

Building Resilience and Promoting Protective Factors and Protective Capacities

Although exposure to abuse or neglect increases the risk of negative psychological, social, and emotional short- and long-term outcomes, your child's resilience may protect him or her from developing poor physical or mental health issues. According to the American Psychological Association, resilience in children and youth enables them to thrive in spite of their adverse circumstances. It involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned over time and can be nurtured through positive and healthy relationships with parents and other caregivers and adults who guide them in healthy problem-solving strategies (see <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>). As with any skill, resilience must be developed. You can help your child or youth build resilience if you:

- **Model a positive outlook.** When faced with a problem, show your child or youth that the problem is only for a short time and that things will get better. Children and youth learn from your ability to bounce back from and work through tough situations.

- **Build confidence.** Let your child or youth know when he or she does something well, such as demonstrating kindness or honesty.
- **Express support.** Express love, empathy, and support verbally and physically. Express your love through words, notes, and hugs.
- **Build connections.** Create bonds with friends and family that can support your child or youth during challenges and teach him or her to consider other people's feelings.
- **Allow children to express their feelings.** Teach them how to identify and describe their feelings and commend them for expressing feelings of hurt or sadness without acting out.
- **Be consistent.** If you say you'll be there, be there. If you say you'll listen to concerns, listen. This will help teach your child or youth that people can be trusted.
- **Be patient.** Children's reactions to trauma vary as widely as the types of trauma one can experience. There isn't a one-size-fits-all solution.
- **Teach your child or youth the importance of healthy behaviors.** Have open and honest talks about the dangers of drugs and alcohol, smoking, and sexually inappropriate behavior. Teach your child the importance of eating properly and exercising.

The healing process does not always follow a clear, straight path. After experiencing trauma or maltreatment, resilience takes time to develop. Steps you can take to help your child or youth heal include the following:

- Address your child's physical safety first by assuring him or her that no one will physically touch or harm them. This will help your child or youth develop feelings of trust and openness to psychological and emotional healing.
- Address the past as the past. Help your child or youth identify elements of his or her current life that are different from the past. Use this as a chance to discuss expectations and personal boundaries—limits set in relationships that protect our sense of self. To encourage feelings of belonging and attachment, provide regular routines around mealtime, naps, and bedtime; talk with your child or youth about the importance of feelings; and teach him or her to solve problems in age-appropriate ways.

For more ways to help your child or youth build resilience, see the tip sheet, *Building Resilience in Children and Teens*, at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/preventionmonth/resources/tip-sheets/>.

As children and youth can be resilient, so can parents. By increasing your own resiliency, you will help to improve your child or youth's long-term well-being. As you develop these skills, you build protective factors, which are elements or tools that help to reduce the negative effects of child maltreatment and the trauma resulting from it.

Protective Factors

Issues like substance use, poverty, parental stress, and lack of parental supervision present risks (also known as risk factors) that can increase your child’s chances of developing poor health, experiencing abuse or neglect, or other negative outcomes. Protective factors, such as strong social connections and solid parent-child attachments, may buffer the effect of risks and help children, youth, and families manage difficult circumstances and fare better in school, work, and life. Building protective factors to support children and youth who have experienced child abuse and neglect can also help increase their resilience. Learn more on Information Gateway’s Protective Factors to Promote Well-Being webpage at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/promoting/protectfactors>.

Protective Capacities

As a parent, you also have the potential to protect your children. These abilities, known as protective capacities, develop over time. Improving your own mental and emotional well-being will help you to develop these protective capacities, which will then better enable you to help your child or youth build resilience and reduce the risk of experiencing harm, including abuse or neglect. Protective capacities can be categorized as mental, emotional, or behavioral.

Mental Protective Capacity¹: Your knowledge, understanding, and perceptions of your child or youth

Emotional Protective Capacity: Your feelings and attitudes toward, and identification with, your child or youth

Behavioral Protective Capacity: Your actions and behaviors toward your child or youth

A parent who develops healthy protective capacities may incorporate positive characteristics into his or her mental, emotional, and behavioral thoughts, feelings, and actions (see Table 1 for characteristics associated with each capacity).

Table 1: Protective Capacities²

Mental Protective Capacity	Emotional Protective Capacity	Behavioral Protective Capacity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has an accurate perception of the child • Recognizes threats to the child’s safety • Has realistic expectations of the child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feels a positive attachment to the child • Shows love toward the child • Has empathy for the child • Is sensitive toward the child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a history of protecting the child • Sets aside own needs for benefit of the child • Controls harmful impulses in parenting situations

¹ These terms and definitions are adapted from the Children’s Bureau’s Center for States’ publication *Protective Capacities and Protective Factors: Common Ground for Protecting Children and Strengthening Families* (2016) available at <https://tinyurl.com/yax8xkpk>.

² The information in this table is adapted from the Action for Child Protection publication *Assessing Caregiver Protective Capacities Related to Parenting* (2010) available at http://action4cp.org/documents/2010/pdf/June_2010__Assessing_Caregiver_Protective_Capacities.pdf.



Building a Strong Relationship With Your Child or Youth

A child's earliest relationships are some of the most important. Attachment refers to the relationship that develops as a result of a caregiver's sensitive attention to a child and the child's responses to the caregiver. A strong and secure emotional bond between children and their caregivers is critical for children's physical, social, and emotional development, including their ability to form trusting relationships and to exhibit positive behaviors. Helping parents learn and practice the nurturing skills that lead to strong, secure attachments is a well-supported pathway to positive outcomes for children.

If children lack an attachment to a caring adult, receive inconsistent nurturing, or experience harsh punishment, the consequences can affect their lifelong health, well-being, and relationships with others. In some cases, children may lack a strong attachment because their parents work multiple jobs to provide for them, so less time is spent together building a strong and secure emotional bond. Parents may need additional support and resources to address this issue (see the Where Can I Find Support? section of this factsheet for more information.)

To help build a secure relationship with your child or youth:

- **Be available.** Provide consistent support to build feelings of trust and safety.
- **Be supportive and empathic.** Comfort your child or youth when he or she is upset, modeling appropriate displays of affection and building self-esteem.
- **Be encouraging.** Listen and be involved and interested in your child's activities. Stay aware of his or her interests and friends and stay actively supportive.

Resources for Building Resilience and Promoting Protective Factors and Protective Capacities

The American Psychological Association's guide *Resilience Guide for Parents and Teachers*: <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/resilience.aspx>

The American Academy of Pediatrics' Building Resilience webpage: <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/default.aspx>

The Children's Bureau's annual *Prevention Resource Guide* offers parents and caregivers tip sheets and more information about protective factors: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/preventionmonth/resources/tip-sheets/>

The Children's Bureau's Child Welfare Capacity Building Center for States' webinar "Protective Capacities and Protective Factors: Common Ground for Protecting Children and Strengthening Families" (free registration required). Although the webinar is intended for child welfare managers, the information on protective capacities and protective factors may be equally helpful for parents and other caregivers: <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/child-protection/> (scroll down to Webinars)

Developing Caring Discipline Techniques

As part of normal development, children and youth act out on occasion and challenge the authority of parents or caregivers. Toddlers throw tantrums. Children whine. Teenagers argue. To help a child learn from these natural behaviors, parents need sound techniques for handling them.

Retraumatization occurs when people have experiences that, whether or not they are aware of it, remind them of a past trauma, leading them to experience the initial traumatic event again.

Positive discipline techniques teach children and youth the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behavior and help a child internalize self-control, self-discipline, and self-respect. Children should always know that you love, support, and respect them, even when you correct their unacceptable behavior.

When parents are angry or feel frustrated they may use unpleasant or painful methods—physical or emotional—in reaction to and for the purpose of discouraging behavior. A child who is misbehaving can be frustrating but using physical force or other abusive techniques to teach a lesson is never appropriate.

For children and youth who have experienced abuse or neglect, using physical force or other abusive techniques could elicit memories of past trauma or cause retraumatization. How harmful a method is may depend not only on the punishment chosen but also on the abuse or neglect your child or youth experienced. For example, sending your child to bed hungry could retraumatize her if she had previously experienced neglect by being denied food.

Other factors like lack of sleep and a poor diet can also impair a child's ability to make good choices or to show self-control. Before disciplining a child for misbehaving, consider whether he or she is tired, hungry, or reacting to an underlying issue like fear or anxiety. Try to engage your child or youth in a quiet activity that will provide needed rest or decrease anxiety or offer a snack or an early meal to ease his or her hunger.

Positive Discipline Tips and Techniques

Positive discipline that works at one age may not work at another. Children change as they go through their developmental stages, so using age-appropriate discipline when parenting a child or youth who has experienced abuse or neglect is important in promoting healthy development and preventing retraumatization. Allow your child or youth to learn at his or her own pace. Break tasks into small, manageable steps that will provide a sense of success and accomplishment.

Table 2 shows ways in which discipline builds and changes over time as children go from very young, to school age, to teenagers. It provides suggestions on how you can enforce discipline through role modeling, setting rules and limits, and using encouragement to discipline instead of physical or emotional abuse.

Table 2: Discipline by Developmental Stages³

Young Children (Ages 0–5)	School-Age Children (Ages 6–12)	Teens (Ages 13–18)
<p>Role Modeling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children learn by watching adults. At this age, showing children how to act and how to follow rules is crucial for learning. If you treat children with respect and kindness, they will learn positive behaviors 	<p>Role Modeling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You are your child’s greatest role model. Behave and treat others, including your child, the way you expect them to behave and treat others. Role play social skills and problem-solving for greater learning. 	<p>Role Modeling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although your teen may not engage with you like he or she did as a child, what you do and say is still important. Help your teenager manage self-control by modeling control of your own emotions.
<p>Rules/Limits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rules and expectations should be clear, simple, and enforced consistently by following through on consequences. This helps young children feel secure. For example, if you say, “You will have to get out of the bath if you keep splashing,” make sure you follow through. 	<p>Rules/Limits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish an end time for a negative consequence, such as loss of TV time for 24 hours or loss of a video game for 2 days. Be consistent but also be flexible and allow for independent choice making when possible. 	<p>Rules/Limits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set up rules for things such as homework, chores, time with friends, curfews, and dating and discuss them with your teenager. Give your teen control over some things, which will help to limit the number of power struggles and will ensure your teen respects your decisions.
<p>Encouragement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discipline is also about recognizing good behavior. Give praise to reward good behavior. 	<p>Encouragement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide your child with positive attention daily, including quality time spent just with him or her. Don’t expect perfection. Praise their efforts so they know they are doing well and don’t have to be perfect. 	<p>Encouragement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guide your teen in making decisions and solve problems with them. Ask for their input and ideas and decide the best solution together. Empower them to make their own choices while giving them your support.
<p>No Physical Punishment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Never call your child names or hit them. You will teach them that this type of behavior is acceptable. Use direct eye contact and a calm tone when giving a direction, a warning, or when enforcing a consequence. 	<p>No Physical Punishment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid negative methods of behavior correction, such as sarcasm, teasing, verbal abuse, or physical punishment, as they do not help children learn.² Set up a behavior plan or chart to decrease negative behaviors. At this age, children are eager to work toward rewards. Give praise and acknowledge good choices. 	<p>No Physical Punishment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> When your teen breaks a rule, take away privileges such as screen time or time with friends and discuss why these consequences have occurred. Communicate with them about what they need to do to earn their privilege(s) back.

³ Unless noted otherwise, the items listed in this table are adapted from the Behavior Corner, LLC, webpage, Discipline Considerations Based on Age (2014), available at <http://behaviorcorner.com/age-discipline/>.

Resources on Discipline

Prevent Child Abuse America's webpage Tips for Parents: Teaching Discipline to Your Children offers advice for parents on teaching discipline: <http://preventchildabuse.org/resource/tips-for-parents-teaching-discipline-to-your-children/>

The annual *Prevention Resource Guide* includes tip sheets for parents and caregivers, such as Dealing With Temper Tantrums, which address several parenting issues. The free guide and tip sheets are available on Information Gateway's website: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/preventionmonth/resources/resource-guide/>

The Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance provides definitions of discipline, parenting styles, and abuse, as well as examples of the difference between discipline and abuse: <http://www.pa-fsa.org/Parents-Caregivers/Preventing-Child-Abuse-Neglect/Discipline-Parenting-Styles-and-Abuse>

For more information on the differences between discipline, punishment, and child abuse, visit Information Gateway's Discipline Versus Abuse webpage: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/defining/disc-abuse/>

Where Can I Find Support?

Recovering from abuse and neglect is a journey that affects the entire family. Parents and caregivers need support to learn as much as they can about child maltreatment. Developing your parenting skills can go a long way toward promoting your child's well-being and building a healthy family. Circle of Parents offers parent-led self-help groups where anyone in a parenting role can openly discuss the successes and challenges of raising children: <http://circleofparents.org/>.

Parent Education and Training

Parent education programs offer ways to handle demanding situations and enhance problem-solving skills. These support and training programs are geared toward reinforcing your positive parenting skills and teaching you effective strategies to reduce the occurrence of your child's misbehavior. Parent education programs can be online or in-person, involve one-to-one instruction, or take place in a group setting. Whether you prefer a course with direct instruction, videos, or another format, successful programs:

- Promote positive family interaction
- Involve fathers
- Use interactive training techniques
- Offer opportunities to practice new skills
- Teach emotional communication skills
- Encourage peer support

Resources on Parent Education

Nurturing Parenting Programs offer parents materials and resources designed to build nurturing parenting skills: <http://nurturingparenting.com/NPLLevelsPrevent.html>

The website for the FRIENDS National Resource Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention, a service of the Children's Bureau, has several resources for parents: <https://friendsnrc.org/parent-leadership>

Information Gateway's Parent Education Programs webpage provides programs and resources that have been successful in supporting parents and strengthening parenting skills: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/prevention-programs/parented/>

Therapy and Support Groups

Dealing with the effects of maltreatment can be challenging. You and your family may wish to seek support from a professional. Therapy and support groups can provide children, youth, and caregivers with the skills necessary to build healthy relationships, overcome past trauma, and prevent reoccurring or future trauma.

Therapists best suited to assist with parenting children and youth who have experienced abuse or neglect should:

- Be trained and knowledgeable about the impact of trauma on children, youth, and families
- Allow and encourage your participation in treatment
- Not restrain a child or youth or intrude on his or her physical space, as children and youth who have been maltreated need to develop clear boundaries to feel safe and prevent retraumatization

If you're an adoptive parent, it's important that the therapist you seek fits the needs of your family and is "adoption competent." Information Gateway's factsheet, *Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists*, offers information on the different approaches to therapy (for example, group or family therapy, individual psychotherapy, cognitive therapy, and parent-child interaction therapy), treatment settings, and tips for finding the right therapist for adoptive families, but many of the tips are applicable to other families, too: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-therapist/>. Which therapy is best for you and your family may depend on the age of your child, your goals, and the challenges that you and your family want to address.

Resources on Therapy and Support Groups

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network provides summaries of trauma-informed therapies to fit your family's needs: <https://www.nctsn.org/treatments-and-practices/treatments-that-work>

To find support groups and other resources in your State, visit the National Foster Care & Adoption Directory: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/>

Conclusion

If you are the parent or caregiver of a child or youth who has experienced abuse and neglect, helping him or her through that trauma can be daunting, but there are resources available to help. It's important to remember that many children and youth who have been abused or neglected do not grow up to abuse others and can live happy and healthy lives. You and your family play an important role in your child's healing. The more you know about child maltreatment and the services available for support, the better prepared you will be to help your child through this difficult time.

Suggested citation:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2018). *Parenting a child who has experienced abuse or neglect*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau

