

POLICY FOR SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN: SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

II. DEFINITIONS & SIGNS OF ABUSE



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Among the signs of moral downfall in the declining social order are the high incidence of violence within the family, the increase in degrading and cruel treatment of spouses and children, and the spread of sexual abuse. It is essential that the members of the [Bahá'í] community . . . take the utmost care not to be drawn into acceptance of such practices because of their prevalence. They must ever be mindful of their obligation to exemplify a new way of life distinguished by its respect for the dignity and rights of all people, by its exalted moral tone, and by its freedom from oppression and from all forms of abuse.¹

¹ Universal House of Justice, 24 January 1993, to an individual believer quoted in *Antidotes to Domestic Violence* by Dr Michael Penn, an article in *The Bahá'í World: 2003-2004* (2005: page 148).

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Definitions of abuse (England and Wales)

The following definitions of child abuse are recommended as criteria throughout England and Wales by the Department of Health, Department for Education and Skills and the Home Office in their joint document, *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (1999), (definitions in relation to legislation in Scotland & Northern Ireland are not necessarily the same: this section is incorporated from *Guidance to Churches – a working manual for child protection and safe practice*, January 2004, from the Churches' Child protection Advisory Service).

Somebody may abuse or neglect a child by inflicting harm, or by failing to act to prevent harm. Children may be abused in a family or in an institutional or community setting by those known to them or, more rarely, by a stranger.

PHYSICAL ABUSE

Physical abuse may involve hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning, suffocating or otherwise causing physical harm to a child. Physical harm may also be caused when a parent or carer feigns the symptoms of, or deliberately causes ill health to a child whom they are looking after. This is commonly described using terms such as 'factitious illness by proxy' or 'Munchausen Syndrome by proxy' - see below.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Emotional abuse is the persistent emotional ill-treatment of a child such as to cause severe and continuous adverse effects on the child's emotional development. It may involve conveying to children that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate or valued only so far as they meet the needs of another person. It may feature age or developmentally inappropriate expectations being imposed on children. It may involve causing children to feel frightened or in danger, or the exploitation or corruption of children. Some level of emotional abuse is involved in all types of ill-treatment of a child, though it may occur alone.

SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including penetrative (e.g. rape or buggery) or non-penetrative acts. They may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, pornographic material or watching sexual activities, or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways.

NEGLECT

Neglect is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development. It may involve a parent or carer failing to provide adequate food, shelter and clothing, failing to protect a child from physical harm or danger, or the failure to ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment. It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs.

Further definitions of abuse

MUNCHAUSEN'S SYNDROME BY PROXY

The Oxford Textbook of Psychiatry defines Munchausen's Syndrome by proxy as: "A form of child abuse in which the parents, or carers, give false accounts of symptoms in their children and may fake signs of illness (to draw attention to themselves). They seek repeated medical investigations and needless treatment for their children." The government issued guidance for professionals working in situations where Munchausen's is suspected in 'Safeguarding Children in whom Illness is Fabricated or Induced' (2002).

SIGNIFICANT HARM

This relates to the degree of harm that triggers statutory action to protect a child. It is based on the individual child's health or development compared to that which could reasonably be expected of a similar child. e.g. severity of ill treatment, degree and extent of physical harm, duration and frequency of abuse and neglect, premeditation. Department of Health guidance suggests that 'significant' means 'considerable, noteworthy or important.'

SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Linked with emotional abuse, spiritual abuse could be defined as an abuse of power, often done in the name of God or religion, which involves manipulating or coercing someone into thinking, saying or doing things without respecting their right to choose for themselves. Some indicators of spiritual abuse might be a leader who is intimidating and imposes his/her will on other people, perhaps threatening dire consequences or the wrath of God if disobeyed. He or she may say that God has revealed certain things to them and so they know what is right. Those under their leadership are fearful to challenge or disagree, believing they will lose the leader's (or more seriously God's) acceptance and approval.

The issue of the exploitation of vulnerable young people and adults by people in positions of power within the church is covered in some detail in the report "Time for Action", produced by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI).

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The Home Office definition of domestic violence is "Any violence between current or former partners in an intimate relationship, wherever and whenever the violence occurs. The violence may include physical, sexual, emotional or financial abuse." (Home Office Research Studies. Domestic Violence: Findings from a new British Crime Survey self-completion questionnaire.1999)

ORGANISED ABUSE

'Organised or multiple abuse may be defined as abuse involving one or more abuser and a number of related or non-related children and young people. The abusers concerned may be acting in concert to abuse children, sometimes acting in isolation, or may be using an institutional framework or position of authority to recruit children for abuse'. (Government Guidelines-'Working Together to Safeguard Children'1999).

CHILD PROSTITUTION AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Children involved in prostitution and other forms of commercial sexual exploitation should be treated primarily as the victims of abuse and their needs require careful assessment. (Government Guidelines -'Working Together to Safeguard Children' 1999. See also 'Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation 2017 - Supplementary Guidance to Working Together to Safeguard Children 2015').

('Working Together to Safeguard Children (1999)' has been superseded by 'Working Together to Safeguard Children (2015)')

BULLYING & CYBER BULLYING

Though as far as the National Spiritual Assembly is aware bullying is not a problem within the Bahá'í community, comments on our policy from the NI Commissioner for children and young people pointed up the absence of guidance on this issue. Should the need arise there is a useful website which contains the latest advice at

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/bullying>.

Recognising possible signs of abuse

The following signs may or may not be indicators that abuse has taken place, but the possibility should be considered.

PHYSICAL SIGNS OF ABUSE

Any injuries not consistent with the explanation given for them

Injuries that occur to the body in places which are not normally exposed to falls, rough games, etc

Injuries that have not received medical attention

Neglect - under nourishment, failure to grow, constant hunger, stealing or gorging food, untreated illnesses, inadequate care, etc

Reluctance to change for, or participate in, games or swimming

Repeated urinary infections or unexplained tummy pains

Bruises, bites, burns, fractures etc which do not have an accidental explanation*

Cuts/scratches/substance abuse*

INDICATORS OF POSSIBLE SEXUAL ABUSE

Any allegations made by a child concerning sexual abuse

Child with excessive preoccupation with sexual matters and detailed knowledge of adult sexual behaviour, or who regularly engages in age-inappropriate sexual play

Sexual activity through words, play or drawing

Child who is sexually provocative or seductive with adults

* These signs may indicate the possibility that a child or young person is self-harming, mostly by cutting, burning, self-poisoning. Approximately 20,000 are treated in accident and emergency departments in the UK each year

Inappropriate bed-sharing arrangements at home

Severe sleep disturbances with fears, phobias, vivid dreams or nightmares, sometimes with overt or veiled sexual connotations

Eating disorders - anorexia, bulimia*

EMOTIONAL SIGNS OF ABUSE

Changes or regression in mood or behaviour, particularly where a child withdraws or becomes clinging. Also depression/aggression, extreme anxiety.

Nervousness, frozen watchfulness

Obsessions or phobias

Sudden under-achievement or lack of concentration

Inappropriate relationships with peers and/or adults

Attention-seeking behaviour

Persistent tiredness

Running away/stealing/lying

RACE, CULTURE & RELIGION

Crucial to any assessment is a knowledge and sensitivity to racial, cultural and religious aspects. Remember also that differences exist not only between ethnic groups but also within the same ethnic group and between different neighbourhoods and social classes. While different practices must be taken into account, it is also important to remember that all children have basic human rights. Differences in child-rearing do not justify child abuse.