



Child Abuse Identification & Reporting

Under California law, mandated reporters, which includes an administrator or employee of a public or private youth center, youth program, or youth organization are required to report any known or suspected instances of child abuse or neglect to the county child welfare department or to a local law enforcement agency (local police/sheriff's department).¹

Child abuse is more than bruises or broken bones. While physical abuse often leaves visible scars, not all child abuse is as obvious, but can do just as much harm. It is important that individuals working with and around children be able to know what constitutes child abuse or child neglect and know how to identify potential signs.

Child Abuse and/or Child Neglect Can Be Any of the Following:

- A physical injury inflicted on a child by another person other than by accidental means.
- The sexual abuse, assault, or exploitation of a child.
- The negligent treatment or maltreatment of a child by a person responsible for the child's welfare under circumstances indicating harm or threatened harm to the child's health or welfare. This is whether the harm or threatened harm is from acts or omissions on the part of the responsible person.
- The willful harming or endangerment of the person or health of a child, any cruel or inhumane corporal punishment or any injury resulting in a traumatic condition.

One does not have to be physically present or witness the abuse to identify suspected cases of abuse, or even have definite proof that a child may be subject to child abuse or neglect. Rather, the law requires that a person have a "reasonable suspicion" that a child has been the subject of child abuse or neglect. Under the law, this means that it is reasonable for a person to entertain a suspicion of child abuse or neglect, based upon facts that could cause a reasonable person, in a like position, drawing, when appropriate, on his or her training and experience, to suspect child abuse or neglect.

Red flags for abuse and neglect are often identified by observing a child's behavior at school, recognizing physical signs, and observations of dynamics during routine interactions with certain adults. While the following signs are not proof that a child is the subject of abuse or neglect, they should prompt one to look further.

Warning Signs of Emotional Abuse in Children

- Excessively withdrawn, fearful, or anxious about doing something wrong.
- Shows extremes in behavior (extremely compliant or extremely demanding; extremely passive or extremely aggressive).
- Doesn't seem to be attached to the parent or caregiver.

¹ California Penal Code Section 11165.7

- Acts either inappropriately adult-like (taking care of other children) or inappropriately infantile (rocking, thumb-sucking, throwing tantrums).

Warning Signs of Physical Abuse in Children

- Frequent injuries or unexplained bruises, welts, or cuts.
- Is always watchful and “on alert” as if waiting for something bad to happen.
- Injuries appear to have a pattern such as marks from a hand or belt.
- Shies away from touch, flinches at sudden movements, or seems afraid to go home.
- Wears inappropriate clothing to cover up injuries, such as long-sleeved shirts on hot days.

Warning Signs of Neglect in Children

- Clothes are ill-fitting, filthy, or inappropriate for the weather.
- Hygiene is consistently bad (unbathed, matted and unwashed hair, noticeable body odor).
- Untreated illnesses and physical injuries.
- Is frequently unsupervised or left alone or allowed to play in unsafe situations and environments.
- Is frequently late or missing from school.

Warning Signs of Sexual Abuse in Children

- Trouble walking or sitting.
- Displays knowledge or interest in sexual acts inappropriate to his or her age, or even seductive behavior.
- Makes strong efforts to avoid a specific person, without an obvious reason.
- Doesn't want to change clothes in front of others or participate in physical activities.
- A sexually transmitted disease (STD) or pregnancy, especially under the age of fourteen.
- Runs away from home.

Reporting Child Abuse or Neglect

Parents and guardians of pupils have the right to file a complaint against anyone they suspect has engaged in abuse or neglect of a child. Community members do not need to provide their name when making a report of child abuse or neglect. Telephone numbers for each county's emergency response for child abuse reporting are located at California Emergency Response Child Abuse Reporting.

Obligations of Mandated Reporters

All persons who are mandated reporters are required, by law, to report all known or suspected cases of child abuse or neglect. It is not the job of the mandated reporter to determine whether the allegations are valid. If child abuse or neglect is reasonably suspected or if a pupil shares information with a mandated reporter leading him/her to believe abuse or neglect has taken place, the report must be made. No supervisor or administrator can impede or inhibit a report or subject the reporting person to any sanction.

To make a report, a person must contact an appropriate local law enforcement or county child welfare agency, listed below. This legal obligation is not satisfied by making a report of the incident to a supervisor or to the school. An appropriate law enforcement agency may be one of the following:

- A Police or Sheriff's Department (not including a school district police department or school security department).
- A County Probation Department, if designated by the county to receive child abuse reports.
- A County Welfare Department/County Child Protective Services.

The report should be made immediately over the telephone and should be followed up in writing. The law enforcement agency has special forms for this purpose that they will ask you to complete. If a report cannot be made immediately over the telephone, then an initial report may be made via e-mail or fax. A report may also be filed at the same time with your school district or county office of education (COE). School districts and COEs, however, do not investigate child abuse allegations, nor do they attempt to contact the person suspected of child abuse or neglect.

Rights to Confidentiality and Immunity

Mandated reporters are required to give their names when making a report. However, the reporter's identity is kept confidential. Reports of suspected child abuse are also confidential. Mandated reporters have immunity from state criminal or civil liability for reporting as required. This is true even if the mandated reporter acquired the knowledge, or suspicion of the abuse or neglect, outside his/her professional capacity or scope of employment.