

Physical/Sexual/Emotional Abuse Overview

“All children have the right to be protected from physical neglect and abuse, including sexual victimization, and from emotional neglect and abuse.”

***- Mission and Guiding Principles for
Pennsylvania’s Child Dependency System***

Child abuse, in any of its forms, touches the lives of many children in the child welfare system. Despite its form, abuse has the potential to affect a child physically, cognitively, emotionally and socially for years following an incident. In view of these far-reaching consequences, it makes a legal finding of child abuse so important, as the first step in the process of remediation and recovery. While sometimes straightforward, determining if an incident or injury is abuse can be complicated and multidimensional. Notwithstanding this, judges overseeing dependency proceedings must determine whether a child has been the victim of physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse (Adjudication – Chapter 6). This includes ensuring the elements of due process, evaluating evidence presented, asking questions when needed, and making an independent determination.

This Benchbook Resource Companion has many sections which address the subsequent effects of abuse. Sections on child development, trauma and attachment/bonding may be particularly helpful in developing an understanding of the sequelae of abuse. This section however offers information about the acts of abuse themselves. Primary resources in this section include two articles written by the American Academy of Pediatrics. The first article provides a general overview of skin injuries which are likely to be the result of physical abuse. The article provides a list of considerations for pediatricians when examining children. While written for pediatricians, the article provides important information for non-medical professionals presented in a brief, concise format. The second article provides an explanation for the lack of specific clinical findings in sexual abuse cases.

Finally, this section provides citations to nine additional resources identified by the committee as excellent topic specific resources (i.e. Shaken Baby, Medical Assessment Protocols, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Normal Sexual Development/Behavior Problems, and Emotional Abuse). While not a substitute for professional testimony and other evidence, the resources are intended to provide a general overview of these topics.

