

## The Impact of Child Abuse on Mental Health

Discussing child abuse and neglect is challenging, but it's a necessary step in securing a brighter future for our children. While there has been a 48% reduction in child abuse and neglect victims from 2018 to 2022, according to the latest [Child Maltreatment report](#) from the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Kentucky is still around 60% higher than the national rate. If we want to protect the well-being of children, we must continue to increase awareness of child abuse prevention resources and empower others to play a role in protecting children and families.

### How to Recognize Signs of Child Abuse

According to the [American Journal of Psychiatry](#), one in four children will experience child abuse or neglect at some point in their lifetime. However, it is widely known that statistics like these are not completely accurate because the majority of abuse and neglect goes unreported. One reason is because we often think of abuse as physical, but this is just one form abuse can take.

Part of our responsibility as members of the community is to be aware of signs of abuse and to protect children from harm. The four common types of abuse and neglect include:

- **Physical abuse:** Using physical force that can result in injury. Some examples include hitting, kicking, shaking, and burning.
- **Sexual abuse:** Pressuring or forcing a child to engage in sexual behaviors. This includes fondling, penetration, and exposing a child to other sexual activities.
- **Emotional abuse:** Harming a child's self-worth or emotional well-being. Examples include name-calling, shaming, rejection, withholding love, and threatening.
- **Neglect** is the failure to meet a child's basic physical and emotional needs. Needs include lack of housing, food, clothing, education, access to medical care, and having feelings validated and appropriately responded to.

Find more information on [understanding the signs of child abuse and neglect](#).

### Impact on Mental Health

Abuse puts a significant amount of stress on children and can disrupt the natural development of their brains. According to the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO), this stress can weaken how a child's nervous system and immune system develop. As a result, survivors of childhood abuse are at an increased risk of physical and mental health problems.

The mental and emotional results of abuse can appear in various ways, affecting children well into adulthood. Conditions such as anxiety, [depression](#), and memory problems often continue throughout their lives. Feelings of shame and guilt are also common, with children sometimes blaming themselves for the situation or viewing themselves as somehow broken. To hide the abuse from others, they may withdraw, isolate, and have a hard time making friends.

Additionally, someone who experienced childhood abuse may have intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, and nightmares. These are often [symptoms of PTSD](#). Abuse can also result in emotional numbing, social isolation, and panic. There can also be physical reactions that disrupt the body's normal functioning by impairing both mental and physical functioning.

Given the impact of child abuse on mental health, it's crucial for affected children to have the necessary support to address these effects in a healthy manner. Ideally, this would be with the support of mental health professionals.

### **Additional Resources and Support**

Child abuse and neglect are preventable. Every person has the responsibility to recognize abuse and report it. Even simply sharing information with friends and family can help. Find more resources on [ways you can help prevent child abuse in your community](#).

Children whose experiences are validated, and who receive professional support after abuse, have better mental health outcomes. At Seven Counties Services, we offer a wide array of treatment options provided by some of Kentucky's most qualified and caring pediatric and psychiatric professionals. Our scope of services includes individual and family counseling, patient-centered treatment planning, mental health services, medication management, screening, assessment, and diagnosis, in-home therapy, and targeted case management. We also offer 24-hour mental health crisis response through our child crisis line at (502) 589-8070, as well as the Crisis Stabilization Unit (CSU) for immediate support. Learn more about [services offered at the CSU](#), and [what to do if your child is experiencing a mental health crisis](#).

If your child has been diagnosed with a mental health disorder or is experiencing one or more signs and symptoms, please contact us today. The journey for everyone is different, but our passion is to be with you every step of the way! [Request a first appointment online](#) or call (502) 589-1100 to get started.

*Reviewed by Brittany Pape, the Division Director of Child Crisis Services at Seven Counties Services.*