**Recognising signs of abuse**

What is abuse and neglect?

Abuse and neglect are forms of maltreatment of a child. Someone may abuse or neglect a child by inflicting harm or by failing to prevent harm. Children may be abused in a family or in an institutional or community setting, by those known to them or by a stranger, for example, via the internet. They may be abused by an adult or adults, or another child or children. Child abuse can have major long-term effects on all aspects of a child's health, development and well being. The main forms of maltreatment are:

**Physical Abuse**

Physical abuse is deliberately causing physical harm to a child. This might involve punching, kicking, biting, burning, scalding, shaking, throwing or beating with objects such as belts, whips, or sticks. It also includes poisoning, giving a child alcohol or illegal drugs, drowning or suffocation. Physical harm may also be caused when a parent or carer fabricates the symptoms of illness in a child. In pregnancy an unborn child can be harmed by domestic violence.

**Emotional Abuse**

Emotional abuse is where repeated verbal threats, criticism, ridicule, shouting, lack of love and affection causes a severe adverse effect on a child's emotional development. It includes conveying to children that they are worthless, unloved, inadequate or valued only insofar as they meet the needs of another person. Emotional abuse may include not giving a child opportunities to express their views, deliberately silencing them or 'making fun' of what they say or how they communicate. It may feature inappropriate expectations being imposed on a child, over protection and limitation of exploration and learning, or preventing the child from taking part in normal social interaction. It may involve seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another person. It may involve serious bullying (including cyberbullying), causing children frequently 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 children, or 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. This may involve physical contact including penetrative sex, oral sex, masturbation, kissing, rubbing, or touching outside of clothing, or it may involve non-contact activities such as involving children in watching sexual activities, producing or looking at sexual images, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse (including via the internet). Abusers can be men, women or other children.

**Exploitation**

Exploitation is the intentional, manipulation or abuse of power and control over a child or young person: to take unfair advantage of a child or young person or situation, for personal gain. It may manifest itself in many forms such as child labour, slavery, servitude, engagement in criminal activity, begging, benefit or other financial fraud or child trafficking. It extends to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of children for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation can be sexual in nature.

**Neglect**

Neglect is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in serious impairment of the child's health or development. Neglect is when a parent or carer fails to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter (including exclusion from home or abandonment), medical care, or protection from physical and emotional harm or danger. It also includes failure to ensure access to education or to look after a child because the carer is under the influence of alcohol or drugs. In pregnancy neglect may occur as a result of misusing alcohol or drugs.

**Possible signs of abuse**

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

Signs of possible physical abuse

Any injuries not consistent with the explanation given for them

Injuries which occur to the body in places which are not normally exposed to falls or rough games

Injuries which have not received medical attention

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

Bruises, bites, burns and fractures, for example, which do not have an accidental explanation

The child gives inconsistent accounts for the cause of injuries

Frozen watchfulness

Signs of possible sexual abuse

Any allegations made by a child concerning sexual abuse

The child has an excessive preoccupation with sexual matters and inappropriate knowledge of adult sexual behaviour for their age, or regularly engages in sexual play inappropriate for their age

Sexual activity through words, play or drawing

Repeated urinary infections or unexplained stomach pains

The child is sexually provocative or seductive with adults

Inappropriate bed-sharing arrangements at home

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

Eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia.

Signs of possible emotional abuse

Depression, aggression, extreme anxiety, changes or regression in mood or behaviour, particularly where a child withdraws or becomes clingy

Obsessions or phobias

Sudden underachievement or lack of concentration

Seeking adult attention and not mixing well with other children

Sleep or speech disorders

Negative statements about self

Highly aggressive or cruel to others

Extreme shyness or passivity

Running away, stealing and lying

Signs of possible neglect

Dirty skin, body smells, unwashed, uncombed hair and untreated lice

Clothing that is dirty, too big or small, or inappropriate for weather conditions

Frequently left unsupervised or alone

Frequent diarrhoea

Frequent tiredness

Untreated illnesses, infected cuts or physical complaints which the carer does not respond to

Frequently hungry

Overeating junk food

**Possible effects of abuse**

The sustained physical, emotional, sexual abuse or neglect of children can have major long-term effects on all aspects of their health, development and wellbeing. Children can grow up to feel worthless, unlovable, betrayed, powerless, confused, frightened and mistrustful of others. They might feel, wrongly, that the abuse is their fault.

**Possible effects of physical abuse**

Physical abuse can lead directly to neurological damage, physical injuries, disability and in extreme cases death. Physical abuse has been linked to aggressive behaviour in children, emotional and behavioural problems and learning difficulties.

**Possible effects of emotional abuse**

If a child suffers sustained emotional abuse there is increasing evidence of adverse long-term effects on their development. Emotional abuse has a significant impact on a developing child's mental health, behaviour and self-esteem. It can be especially damaging in infancy and can be as important as the other more visible forms of abuse, in terms of its impact on the child. Domestic violence, adult mental health problems and parental substance misuse may be features in families where children are exposed to such abuse.

**Possible effects of sexual abuse**

Disturbed behaviour including self-harm, inappropriate sexual behaviour, sadness, depression and loss of self-esteem have all been linked to sexual abuse. Its adverse effects may last long into adult life. The severity of the impact on the child is believed to increase the longer the abuse continues, the more serious the abuse, the younger the child at the start, and the closeness of the relationship to the abuser. The child's ability to cope with the experience of sexual abuse, once recognised, can be strengthened by the support of a non-abusive adult carer who believes the child, helps the child understand the abuse, and is able to offer help and protection. Some adults who sexually abuse children were themselves sexually abused as children.

**Possible effects of neglect**

Neglect can seriously impair a child's health, physical and intellectual growth and development, and can cause long term difficulties with social functioning, relationships and educational progress. Extreme cases of neglect can cause death.

**Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)**

Knowing the signs of FGM is about to take place or has taken place can help give a voice to children and possibly present the abuse procedure from happening.

There are certain factors that may heighten a girl’s risk of FGM, and these include:

* Being between the ages of 5-8 (although FGM has been reported amongst babies and may also affect older children)
* If a girl’s mother, sister or member of the extended family has been subjected to FGM
* If a girl’s family are less well integrated into the local community or are experiencing poverty or disadvantage
* Coming from areas with large populations of FGM practicing communities. FGM is prevalent in Africa, the Middle East and Asia

Many girls at immediate risk of FGM won’t necessarily understand what is going to happen to them, so it is important to be aware of the signs that FGM might happen.

**Signs that FGM might happen:**

* A special occasion or ceremony is going to take place where a girl ‘becomes a woman’ or is ‘prepared for marriage’
* A relative or someone known as a ‘cutter’ is visiting from abroad
* A female relative, like a mother, sister or aunt has undergone FGM
* A family arranges a long holiday overseas or visits a family abroad during the summer holidays (professionals may become aware of this if parents are preparing vaccinations or planning absence from school)
* A girl has an unexpected or long absence from school
* A girl struggles to keep up in school
* A girl runs away – or plans to run away – from home

**Signs that FGM might have taken place:**

* Difficulty or discomfort walking, standing or sitting
* Complaints of pain between legs
* Spending longer than normal in the bathroom or toilet (due to difficulties urinating)
* Appearing quiet, anxious, or depressed
* In school, a girl may have long periods away from classes (e.g. trying to get out of physical education or sporting activities)
* Mentioning that someone did something to them that they are not allowed to talk about
* Reluctant to go to the doctors or have routine medical examinations
* Asking for help, but possibly avoiding being explicit about the problem because they’re scared or embarrassed
* Acting differently after an absence from school or college (e.g. acting withdrawn or Bleeding, discharge, urinary infections, clutching their body

**Domestic abuse**

Children living in households where domestic violence is happenings are identified as “at risk” of harm suffered by seeing or hearing ill treatment of others. This would include witnessing domestic abuse.

Children are individuals and may respond to witnessing abuse in different ways. Some of the effects may include:

* they may become anxious or depressed
* they may have difficulty sleeping
* they may complain of physical symptoms such as tummy aches
* they may start to wet their bed
* they may behave as though they are much younger than they are
* they may have problems with school
* they may become aggressive or they may internalise their distress and withdraw from other people
* they may have a lowered sense of self-worth
* older children may begin to play truant or start to use alcohol or drugs
* they may begin to self-harm by taking overdoses or cutting themselves

Children may also feel angry, guilty, insecure, alone, frightened, powerless or confused. They may have ambivalent feelings towards both the abuser and the non-abusing parent.

If you are concerned that a child may be experiencing domestic abuse you