

CHILD ABUSE AND COMMUNICATION

Child abuse has a significant and lasting effect on the life of its victims, leading to not only physical, psychological, and emotional trauma but also potential death. In addition, child abuse can impact multiple aspects of a child's communication and can also lead to negative academic and social outcomes. Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) play a critical role as part of a team that helps children who are survivors of abuse.



WHAT IS CHILD ABUSE?

An act (or failure to act) by a caregiver that causes death, physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or the imminent risk of harm to a child.

KNOW THE SIGNS

Child abuse can be physical, emotional, or sexual in nature and includes neglect. By Arizona State Law (A.R.S. § 36-2281), all behavioral health and school personnel are federally mandated to report any reasonable suspicion that a minor is being abused to Child Protective Services or to a peace officer.

Possible warning signs that a child is being abused:

- Passive, withdrawn, or aggressive behaviors
- Sudden changes in behavior or school performance
- Failure to seek comfort or rejecting proximity to parent
- Refusal to explore environment; distressed or “clingy”
- Regression of skills (e.g., bedwetting, “losing” language)
- Unexplained outbursts of sadness or anger
- Lack of parental supervision
- Unmet medical, hygienic, or clothing needs
- Unexplained bruises after absence from school
- Avoidance or discomfort going home

STATISTICS

- Between 4 and 7 children die each day as result of child abuse.
- 80% of those children are under the age of 4.
- Approximately 700,000 children are abused each year in the US.
- Neglect is the most common form of child abuse.
- Children with disabilities are abused at a rate of 31%, compared to 9% of their nondisabled peers.

HOW TO REPORT

If you suspect that a child is being abused or neglected, **call the 24/7 Arizona Child Abuse Hotline for Arizona at 1-888-767-2445.**

To find out more:
<https://dcs.az.gov/report-child-abuse-or-neglect>

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How is communication affected?

Maltreated children are generally behind their peers in learning to talk.

The effects of abuse can result in:

- Smaller vocabulary size
 - Typically, by age 2, children have at least 50 words. By age 3-4, they usually have 1000 words or more.
- Delay in combining words, relative to their peers
 - Typically, by age 2, children can combine words to make short phrases (e.g., “doggy bye-bye”). By age 3, they usually can make simple sentences.
- Difficulty expressing needs and feelings
- Difficulty explaining abstract or non-concrete ideas
- Reduced ability to tell stories and talk about their experiences
- Language is often off-topic, inappropriate, or redundant
- Difficulty starting and continuing a conversation
- The content of their language is less rich or descriptive

WHY DOES ABUSE AFFECT LANGUAGE?

1) Absence of a language-rich environment

A child learns language best in “language-rich environments,” where the caregiver provides opportunities for social interaction through active engagement and use of complex grammar and varied vocabulary. Children who suffer abuse are rarely in these enriching environments.

2) Lack of the mental resources to learn language

Learning language requires brain power, and children who are in highly stressful situations do not have the mental resources to devote to learning language. Therefore, an abused child will often have reduced language skills compared to their non-abused peers.

SLPscanhelp. In addition to serious psychological and professional counseling, children who have been abused need **early language intervention** to prevent the effects of their abuse from impacting their academic and social outcomes. SLPs play an integral role in supporting these children by promoting positive social communication, language skills, and literacy.

POTENTIAL LONG-TERM EFFECTS ON DEVELOPMENT:

BRAIN DEVELOPMENT:

- Learning difficulties
- Trouble paying attention
- Impaired problem-solving
- Academic difficulties

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT:

- Behavioral problems
- Trouble making friends
- Aggressive behavior
- Attachment issues

GENERAL HEALTH:

- Impaired growth
- Weak immune system
- Chronic fatigue



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