

# 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 also lead to negative academic and social outcomes. Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) play a critical role in a team to best serve children who are survivors of abuse.



UA SCIENCE

Speech, Language,  
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## WHAT IS CHILD ABUSE?

An act or failure to act on behalf of 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.

Warning signs that a child is being abused include:

- Passive, withdrawn, or aggressive behaviors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<sup>1</sup>

- Between 4 and 7 children die each day as result of child abuse.
- 80% of those children are under the age of 4.
- Approx. 700,000 children are abused each year in the US<sup>4</sup>.
- 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.**

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

ARIZONA CHILD ABUSE HOTLINE (24/7)  
DEPARTMENT OF CHILD SAFETY

1-888-767-2445  
<https://dcs.az.gov/>

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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 – at least 50 words
  - By age 3 or 4 – 1000 or more
- Delay in combining words, relative to their peers
  - Typically, by age 2 – combining short phrases
  - By age 3 – simple sentence construction
- 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 our parents provide opportunities for social interaction through active engagement and also use complex grammar and varied vocabulary. Children who suffer abuse are rarely in these 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.

**SLPs can help.** 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. We, as 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 struggle

### SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT:

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

### GENERAL HEALTH:

- Impaired growth
- Weak immune system
- Chronic fatigue



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