



Signs of Abuse and Neglect — Wisconsin Children’s Programs

This handout supports Wisconsin children’s programs. It helps caregivers, workers, and families recognize child abuse and neglect and explains how to report concerns quickly and safely. If a child is in immediate danger, call 911.

Key Definitions

Physical abuse: Non-accidental injury to a child (e.g. hitting, shaking, burning, or other harm).

Emotional abuse: Severe, persistent patterns of behavior that harm a child’s emotional development (e.g., humiliation, threats, rejection).

Sexual abuse: Any sexual contact, exploitation, or exposure involving a child.

Neglect: A caregiver’s failure, refusal, or inability (for reasons other than poverty) to provide necessary care—such as food, clothing, supervision, medical or dental care—so that the child’s health is seriously at risk.

Common signs to watch for:

Physical abuse

- Frequent, unexplained injuries; injuries in various stages of healing; injuries that do not match the explanation.
- Child appears frightened of going home or fearful of a specific person.

Emotional abuse

- Extreme withdrawal, anxiety, depression, or sudden changes in behavior.
- Lack of attachment to caregiver; severe, persistent behavioral outbursts.

Sexual abuse

- Difficulty walking or sitting; torn or stained underclothing; age-inappropriate sexual knowledge or behaviors.
- Sudden changes in mood, sleep, or school performance; disclosures of unwanted contact.

Neglect

- Persistent hunger, poor hygiene, inappropriate clothing for weather, untreated medical or dental needs.
- Lack of supervision; frequent school absences; unsafe home conditions.

What to do if you suspect abuse or neglect

1. If a child is in immediate, life-threatening danger, call 911.
2. Do not investigate on your own. Ensure the child is safe and listen without pressuring for details.
3. Document what you saw or heard (dates, times, observations, exact words used).



How to report in Wisconsin (Children under 18)

Contact the county or tribal Child Protective Services (CPS) agency where the child or the child's family lives. Use the Wisconsin DCF directory to find CPS contact information:

<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/reportabuse>

Mandated reporters—such as health care providers, school staff, childcare workers, and law enforcement—must report suspected child abuse or neglect immediately to CPS or law enforcement.

Learn more: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cps/mandatedreporters>

Tips for documenting concerns (helpful for CPS)

- Record facts (who, what, when, where) and direct quotes; avoid assumptions.
- List any visible injuries or hazards; note if photos were taken by appropriate staff according to policy.
- Include names of any witnesses and whether the child has special communication needs or accommodations.
- Keep information confidential and share only with those who need to know for safety and reporting.

Key Wisconsin resources

- Report child abuse and neglect (CPS county directory): <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/reportabuse>
- Mandated reporters—requirements and training: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cps/mandatedreporters>
- Child abuse & neglect training/resources for schools: <https://dpi.state.wi.us/sspw/safe-schools/child-abuse-and-neglect>

Disclaimer: This information is provided by Acumen Fiscal Agent for general awareness. It does not constitute legal advice. Always follow program requirements, county procedures, and employer policies when reporting concerns.