

The Paediatrician: The Bridge between Help, Safety and Trust in a Family in the Event of (Suspected) Child Abuse or Neglect

Ann De Guchtenaere ^{a,b}, Jeroen Verlinden ^c

^a President of the Belgian Academy of Paediatrics

^b Ghent University Hospital, Department of Paediatrics, Ghent, Belgium

^c Paediatric nurse and independent project coordinator interprofessional, integrated and transmural care for children and young people at Growing Tomorrows Solutions, Belgium

info@baop.be

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What is child abuse?

Child abuse is defined as any harmful act or omission by an adult whom the child depends on, which can result in serious physical or psychological harm. This often happens at home and is referred to as domestic violence. Children and their parents often do not spontaneously report when there are problems at home. They depend on others who may or may not recognize these signals.

All parents strive for the best for their children. Parents who are involved in abuse or neglect of their children often do not act intentionally or with the intention to harm. Usually this is the result of an accumulation of problems within a situation of powerlessness and the lack of prospect of positive change. These parents often struggle with psychological problems or serious addiction issues. Additionally, parents who have been mistreated, neglected, or abused in their own childhood are more likely to continue these behaviours. In addition, some parents may have insufficient parenting skills or fall short in their knowledge of what children need to develop healthily.

Emotional abuse and neglect are the most commonly reported forms of child abuse (1).

Emotional neglect

Emotional neglect occurs when caregivers fail to meet a child's emotional needs, such as providing love and support (2). This can result in problems such as attachment disorders, behavioural problems, and increased vulnerability to depression. The child may also experience a sense of great shame and try to satisfy the parent by performing well (3). Emotional neglect is often accompanied by physical neglect and is more common in boys than in girls.

Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse involves caregivers belittling, ridiculing, or frightening children. This can greatly undermine children's self-confidence. Growing up in an environment of systematic humiliation and rejection can cause deep emotional wounds that may not become apparent until years later (4, 5).

Child abuse in Belgium

Child abuse is also a serious social problem in Belgium that can have a deep and lasting impact on a child's development and well-being. Sometimes up to adulthood.

In 2024, there were 10,913 children in Flanders and Dutch-speaking Brussels who were reported to the centres, an increase of more than 20 percent compared to 2018 (6).

In 2022, there were 6,511 reports in Wallonia and French-speaking Brussels (7).

The reports mainly concern emotional abuse or neglect (37 percent in Flanders; 30.4 percent in Wallonia), physical abuse or neglect (28 percent in Flanders; 26.5 percent in Wallonia), sexual abuse (15 percent in Flanders; 25.7 percent in Wallonia) and general risk situations and processing problems (16 percent in Flanders; 17.4 percent in Wallonia). Of all reported children, the age group 12 to 14-year-olds was the largest.

Emotional abuse and neglect remain the most commonly reported forms of child abuse.

The reporting person was mainly someone from a school-related facility, health care or the child's primary environment.

The increase in the number of reported children indicates a growing willingness of professionals to identify and discuss their concerns about the safety of children.

Child abuse and children's rights

Children have the right to grow up safely. Physical, emotional or sexual abuse, as well as neglect, to witness domestic (partner) violence constitute violations of the fundamental rights of the child, as enshrined in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adopted by the United Nations in 1989. This convention, signed by almost all countries in the world, states in Article 19 that every child has the right to protection from abuse and neglect, and guarantees their access to health care and support (8).

Article 19, International Convention on the Rights of the Child:

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.
2. Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment described heretofore, and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement

Lifelong impact of child abuse

Children who are victims of child abuse have an increased risk of experiencing violence later in life. This can manifest itself in the use of violence themselves or in an abusive relationship.

About a third of children who grow up with violence later use violence against their own children. Possible causes include the lack of a good example, a lack of trust due to insecure attachment, unprocessed traumas and emotional problems, and difficulty balancing autonomy and connection with their partner (9).

Child abuse not only has physical consequences but can also cause long-term damage (10). Examples are post-traumatic stress disorder and dissociative disorders such as memory loss. Child abuse also leads to various psychological problems, including anxiety and depression. Social problems manifest themselves, for example, in withdrawn or aggressive behaviour.

Child abuse affects brain development and epigenetics. This is shown by research into Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). For example, these children have a higher chance of developing serious health problems in the long term and even a life expectancy that is 20 years shorter.

Keeping families stable, safe and together

Child safety comes first. However, assistance focuses primarily on keeping families stable, safe and together. After all, the health effects of family separation are lifelong (11).

Alternative care rarely provides more stability for children than staying with their parents. If it is not possible to leave children with their parents, the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children give priority to placement with close relatives (12).

Role of the paediatrician

Paediatricians play a key role and bridging role in identifying, treating and preventing child abuse. Their medical expertise enables them to recognize the physical and psychological signs of abuse, such as unexplained injuries, malnutrition, or severe anxiety symptoms. In addition, they can form a bridge between the child, the parents, support agencies and the legal authorities, so that children receive the protection and care they need in a timely manner.

Paediatricians also have an educational and preventive function. By providing education to parents and caregivers about safe parenting methods and the importance of a healthy, supportive environment, they can contribute to reducing risk factors. In addition, they can advocate for policies that help combat child abuse, such as better reporting procedures and specialized care programs.

To take on this role as a paediatrician, it is important to have a good overview of the care and assistance landscape in the event of child abuse.

The website on Family Problems of the Federal Government brings together the various per community and region. After all, 'child abuse' is a competence of the federated entities at the policy level (13).

The link between child abuse, the International Convention of the Rights of the Child and the paediatrician is important: the treaty provides an international framework for children's rights and paediatricians play a role in safeguarding these rights. Through prevention, identification and intervention, paediatricians help to realise the principles of the convention and contribute to the future of children worldwide.

More information

Flanders and Brussels: Vlaams Expertisecentrum Kindermishandeling (VECK): [Vlaams Expertisecentrum Kindermishandeling - VECK](#)

Wallonia and Brussels: SOS Enfants – ONE : [Les équipes SOS Enfants - Professionnel - Office de la naissance et de l'enfance](#)

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