

Given the life-long impact abuse and neglect have on the lives of children, it's important to prevent it when possible and identify its signs when necessary, said Thomas Pristow, director of Children and Family Services in the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

"While our goal is to build a system that puts more resources toward preventing the abuse or neglect that result in more children entering the child welfare system, we must also focus on protecting children who are not safe," he said.

For someone never exposed to child abuse or neglect, the signs may not be obvious. Pristow said abuse can be more than physical, but also emotional or sexual abuse, or neglect.

For example, he said, emotional abuse involves constant belittling, shaming, humiliating, or frequent yelling, threatening or bullying. It also can include ignoring or rejecting a child as punishment or limiting physical contact and signs of affection.

Emotionally abused children can be withdrawn, fearful or anxious about doing something wrong, he said. Or, they may show extremes in behavior (overly compliant or demanding, or overly passive or aggressive). They also could act inappropriately adult or infantile.

Neglect occurs when the basic needs of children aren't consistently provided, whether its clothing, supervision, hygiene, or food. "It can be hard to detect," Pristow said. He acknowledged that sometimes parents are unable to care for a child because they are physically or mentally incapable or alcohol or drug abuse impairs their judgment and ability to keep a child safe.

The clothes on neglected children may be very dirty, not fit them or inappropriate for weather conditions. Hygiene might be consistently poor, or illnesses or physical injuries are untreated, he said. Neglect also may involve frequent lack of supervision, including playing in unsafe situations, or frequently missing school or arriving late.

In some situations, community resources can be deployed to support the family so that these factors can be overcome and do not result in a neglect case.

It's not unusual for physical abusers to state their actions are merely discipline.

"The purpose of discipline is to teach children what is right and what is wrong, and not to live in fear," he said.

Signs of physical abuse are not always obvious. Bruises, cuts or welts may be covered by clothing that's not appropriate for the weather. Or, children may pull back from touches, flinch at sudden movements or not want to return home. They also may appear watching for something bad to happen. Injuries may appear as marks from a hand or strap.

Sexual abuse is not limited to touching, Pristow said, and it could include exposing children to sexual situations or materials, Pristow said. Most often close relatives are the perpetrators. Children also can be concerned adults won't believe them or that they will become angry. Therefore, it's important to be receptive if a child mentions inappropriate touching or that someone makes them uncomfortable.

Besides possible physical harm, sexually abused children usually suffer guilt and shame that can inhibit them from talking about it, he said. Later in their life, this can result in promiscuity or reluctance for intimate relations.

"The sooner abuse is identified and reported, the more likely a child is to receive helpful services and recover," Pristow said. "That's why it's very important to know the signs of child abuse."

Persons in a crisis, or who know a family in crisis, are urged to contact the Nebraska Family

Helpline at 1-888-866-8660.

State law requires every citizen to report suspected child abuse and neglect to law enforcement, or the Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-652-1999, he said.

In the event of an emergency, law enforcement should be called immediately. All reports made to authorities are confidential.