

Family Violence: Building a Definition



Community Initiatives Against Family Violence uses the following definition of family violence:

Family violence describes a **systematic pattern of abusive behaviours** within a relationship that is characterized by **intimacy, dependency and/or trust**. The abusive behaviours exist within a context where their purpose is to **gain power, control and induce fear**. Abusive behaviour can take many forms including verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, psychological (e.g. destruction of pets and property), spiritual, economic, violation of rights, and exploitation through neglect. All forms of abusive behaviour are ways in which one human being is trying to have control and/or exploit or have power over another.

This definition recognizes many perspectives of family violence that include all members of society from children to seniors, in relationships that include dating, cohabitating, marital, child-parent, and care-giving.

Terminology

Throughout this module, we will be using certain terms interchangeably:

- **Victim, survivor:** the individual who has been victimized by family violence or has survived a relationship where family violence occurred.
- **Person who uses abusive behaviour, offender, abuser, perpetrator:** the person who uses power and control to abuse another.
- **Family violence, domestic violence, domestic abuse.**

Types of Abuse

Psychological/Emotional Abuse

One incident of physical assault is subject to investigation by the police. By contrast, emotional abuse, even over a prolonged period, is not. However, this doesn't make it less devastating to the victim.

Psychological abuse tactics cause emotional pain and injury. The person who uses abusive behaviour employs emotional or mental attacks, including:

- **Verbal abuse:** name calling and putdowns; yelling or swearing; ignoring partner's feelings; humiliating and making fun of partner in front of others; blaming partner; using the children to manipulate the victim; minimizing, denying, or lying about the abuse.
- **Isolation:** telling the abused person where they can and cannot go; preventing or making it difficult for the abused person to see friends or relatives; monitoring phone calls; calls to cancel victim's class/work or forces the abused person to cancel.
- **Manipulation:** may use guilt, fear, or shame to have the abused person do as the abusive person wishes; subtle threats that are misunderstood by others (e.g. sends red roses after telling the victim that he would put red roses on her grave); threatening suicide.
- **Financial/Economic abuse:** withholding or taking money; creating debt in the name of the abused person while assets are held in the person using abusive behaviour's name; limiting or preventing access to bank accounts; selling or damaging the abused person's possessions; interfering with the abused persons' work or preventing them from working; sabotaging the abused person's efforts to better themselves (e.g. going to school or a training program).
- **Spiritual/Cultural abuse:** refusing to allow the victim to practice their religion/culture; refusing access to ESL classes; criticizing the victim's religion/culture; denying access to religious/cultural events and celebrations; forcing the victim to behave in a manner contrary to their religious/cultural beliefs.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse tactics include a wide range of physical assaults by the individual who uses abusive behaviour to cause pain or physical injury to the abused person's body.

Examples of physical abuse include:

- **Intimidation:** making angry or threatening gestures or threats; use of physical size to intimidate (e.g. standing in the doorway during arguments); driving recklessly when the abused person and/or the children are in the car; referencing violence of others (e.g. "I'll OJ you").
- **Destruction:** destroying possessions, punching walls, throwing or breaking things.
- **Harming pets:** threatening to torture or kill a pet, forcing abused person or the children to torture or kill the pet, torturing or killing the pet themselves.
- **Assault with a weapon:** weapons can include guns, knives, cigarettes, ropes, tasers, belts, etc.; use or threatened use of weapons; keeping weapons around to frighten.
- **Physical violence:** slapping, punching, grabbing, kicking, pushing, biting; forcing improper dress in bad weather; burning (e.g. cigarettes or stove elements); depriving of food, water, medical care, sleep; choking or suffocating—this is a significant risk factor in domestic homicide.

Physical violence may occur only once, but the power of that experience serves to control the person who is abused well into the future. Body language—such as a “look”, a nod, cracking knuckles, touching a shoulder—may go unnoticed by others but will convey a powerful message to the abused person. Once is enough!

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse tactics, which cause both physical and psychological harm, include physical attacks on the breasts and/or genitals, and forced sexual activity.

- Unwanted sexual touching or fondling
- Not respecting privacy
- Sexual relations that partner does not freely agree to
- Unsafe sexual behaviour
- Humiliating, degrading, or painful sexual acts
- Forced sex with people outside the relationship
- Sexual activity immediately following a physical assault
- Forcing sex (rape)
- Refusing to use birth control
- Forcing fantasies
- Having affairs
- Becoming angry and demanding when denied sex

Stalking

Individuals who use abusive behaviour stalk to reinforce how accessible the partner or loved ones are. Some examples of stalking behaviours are:

- Sending cards, gifts, emails or other cryptic messages to work, home, or others
- Vandalizing, breaking into, stealing from partner's home, car or workplace
- Taking partner's mail, retrieving email and voice mail messages

Family Violence: Building a Definition (cont.)

Stalking is identified as Criminal Harassment in federal law, which is when there have been two occurrences of stalking behaviour. A murder committed in the course of a stalking event is considered first degree murder.

Child Abuse

In the teen years, being legally defined as a “child” varies from province to province with the range between 16 and 19 years of age. Abuse happens to both boys and girls from infancy to late adolescence.

Child abuse includes the physical, emotional, or sexual mistreatment or neglect of a child by a parent, guardian, or caregiver which may result in physical injury or emotional and psychological harm to the child. Both boys and girls are at risk, as well as children and young people who are physically and developmentally challenged.

Our understanding of children’s needs is changing and improving all of the time. Some practices that we used to think were okay, we now think are abusive. Federal and provincial law defines uses four main kinds of child abuse: neglect, consisting of a failure to provide basic necessities such as food, clothing shelter, medical care, or supervision; emotional abuse, which are persistent attacks on a child’s sense of self including humiliation, isolation, rejection, intimidation, and exposure to violence; physical abuse, which is the deliberate use of force on a child’s body; and sexual abuse, which includes any sexual behaviour towards a child or exploitation of a child whether consented to or not (for more detailed legal definitions, see “Family Violence: The Law”). Although we recognize different forms of abuse, it is important to remember that a child experiencing one form of abuse may also be experiencing other forms.

Legal definition

Alberta’s legal definition of child abuse is found in the Alberta *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* and in Canada’s *Criminal Code*. These acts define what behaviours and conditions require the police or Child and Family Services Authorities to investigate. There are four legally defined kinds of abuse:

- Neglect: any lack of care that puts a child in danger or harms their development. This encompasses both physical neglect—such as not providing adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care, or protection—and emotional neglect, such as not meeting a child’s needs for affection and belonging.
- Emotional abuse: any behaviours or living situations that can cause emotional injury, including:
 - Exposure to violence or severe conflict
 - Chronic alcohol or drug abuse by the child’s guardian or other occupants in the child’s residence
 - Rejection
 - Inappropriate criticism, threats, humiliation, accusations, or expectations of a child
- Physical abuse: any force used against a child on purpose that results in physical injuries (e.g. broken bones, bruises and burns), whether it is repeated or only occurs once.
- Sexual abuse: any introduction of a child to sexual contact, activity or behaviour. This includes sexual touching, sexual intercourse, taking advantage of a child sexually, or exposing a child to sex. In most cases, the sexual abuse of a child is by someone the child knows. Sexual abuse also includes sexual exploitation, including distributing, selling or making child pornography; using the Internet to attract a young person for sexual purposes; and forcing any minor into prostitution.

How widespread is the problem?

The true incidence of child abuse is difficult to assess, as only the most extreme cases tend to come to the attention of the professional community. The nature of the problem, its secrecy and shame, and the young age and dependency of its victims all serve to lessen voluntary reporting. The failure to recognize child abuse, and in some cases the failure to acknowledge its reality, leads to non-reporting. Furthermore, while the number of child abuse cases handled by social agencies can be calculated, the actual incidence of undiscovered and unreported abuse can only be estimated.