

Definition of Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is defined as physical injury inflicted on a child by other than accidental means. The statutes define physical injury as anything from severe or frequent bruising to more serious injuries.

That's the definition. Now we are going to look at it more closely to understand what it means.

Who can abuse a child?

You will note that this definition says nothing about who might be inflicting the injury. That is intentional. Physical abuse is not restricted to injury inflicted by parents or other caregivers. Physical abuse can be committed by any person, even a person who has no responsibility for the child.

Does it matter how the injuries occur?

Yes. Physical abuse includes only non-accidental injuries. Injuries that are purely accidental are not abuse. Non-accidental injuries fall into one of the following categories:

- The abuser intended to cause injury to the child. For example: A parent immerses a child's hand in scalding water as punishment for stealing.
- The abuser knowingly, carelessly or recklessly engaged in behavior that was dangerous to the child and resulted in injuries, regardless of whether he or she intended to cause the injuries. For example: A man batters his wife while their toddler clings to her leg; the toddler falls against a table and gets a head injury.

Does the child protection system only respond to children with serious injuries?

No. Even children with minor injuries, such as a small bruise, have access to protection under the law if those minor injuries may be an indication that the child is in danger. Remember that the child protection system also responds to threatened abuse or neglect. Check the definition and examples of threatened maltreatment for more information.

What are some situations you may come across that are not physical abuse?

Here are two examples:

- Corporal punishment when there are no injuries
- Slapping a child in anger, when there are no injuries