



THE FEDERATION  
OF MOTHER AND  
CHILD HOMES AND  
SHELTERS

IN ENGLISH

FOR PERSONNEL  
WORKING WITH  
FAMILIES WITH BABIES

# Identify a baby's distress!

IDENTIFYING MALTREATMENT OF A BABY AND INTERVENING



# Who sees the baby?

We live in an adult-centred world where the baby's needs and messages may remain unnoticed. The baby may be overshadowed by problems and conflicts between the parents. When the family has problems, the baby may be maltreated. Some babies do in fact live uncared for and under a threat of violence. Those working with families with babies are responsible for noticing the baby's distress and for helping the baby.

MALTREATMENT MEANS NEGLECTING THE BABY,  
OR PHYSICAL, MENTAL, SEXUAL OR CHEMICAL ABUSE.



# Every tenth baby is at risk of being maltreated.

Abuse or not caring for a baby mostly happens within the family. Babies are totally dependent on being cared for by their parents and are unable to defend themselves or tell their experiences verbally. Parents will not often tell of

maltreating their child themselves. This is why it is important that authorities recognize the risk factors for maltreatment and the symptoms of the babies, and take action.

# A baby not cared for is an alarm signal.

NEGLECT is the most common form of maltreatment and the most difficult to recognize. Neglect means not attending to the baby's basic needs. The baby does not get enough or suitable nourishment for its age, or the food is too cold or too hot, or the food is forced down.

It is neglect if the baby does not wear proper clothing, the baby's skin is not cared for, nappies are not changed often enough or if caring for the baby and its medication is disregarded. A baby is neglected if the living conditions are unhygienic, dirty and filthy, or the baby lives amidst desolation or is exposed to dangers that could be avoided, such as falls and poisoning.

A baby is neglected if it has very few or no experiences of being loved,

accepted and appreciated. A baby is neglected if messages are not answered or they are continuously misinterpreted, the baby is emotionally rejected or left alone to cope with different emotional states.

A neglecting adult does not talk to the baby, and does not look at the baby and touch it tenderly and safely. A parent does not react to a baby crying and does not comfort the baby. An adult repeatedly ignores a baby, takes the baby to places not suitable for it or leaves the baby in the care of unfamiliar and constantly changing people. A neglecting adult forgets the baby. His or her own needs take priority over those of the baby.

MALTREATMENT OFTEN CAUSES MENTAL PROBLEMS, SUBSTANCE ABUSE  
PROBLEMS AND PROBLEMS IN HUMAN RELATIONS LATER ON IN LIFE.

# Maltreatment is also:

## PHYSICAL ABUSE

Hurting the baby by, for example, hitting, shaking, pulling the hair, strapping, pinching, twisting the baby's hands or legs, or throwing the baby against the baby mat.

## MENTAL ABUSE

Active threatening, frightening, name-calling, scolding the baby, shouting at the baby or laughing at the baby's distress.

## SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual touching of the baby, stimulation of sexual organs, sexual intercourse and photographing the baby for obscene publications.

## CHEMICAL ABUSE

Giving drugs, alcohol or such medicines to a baby that are not necessary.

## FAKED ILLNESS OF A CHILD

*(Münchhausen syndrome by proxy)*

A symptom deliberately caused by the parents that requires hospitalization.

IN MOST CASES, MALTREATMENT IS CAUSED BY AN

INABILITY TO COPE, LACK OF INFORMATION, LACK OF JUDGEMENT,

HELPLESSNESS, INABILITY OR CARELESSNESS.

SOME PARENTS HURT THEIR BABIES ON PURPOSE.


## You should worry if a family has a variety of problems.

A family may be burdened by problems in the adult relationship, economic worries and lack of mental support or support in everyday life. The inability to cope is further complicated by mental problems, violence or substance abuse. The parents may have been victims of violence or maltreatment in their own childhood.

A baby may also be maltreated in families that externally seem to do well. Difficulties are seen in everyday family

life, and in the relationship between the baby and the parent. A parent talks little, plays little, does not enjoy the baby and being together with the baby, and does not show an interest in the baby's growth and development. Tearfulness, illness or injury of a baby, and unrealistic expectations and demands towards the baby are also a risk.

Maltreatment is more likely if the pregnancy is unwanted or there are difficulties in the pregnancy or labour.



# A baby must be protected already in the womb.

Parents may maltreat a baby already in the womb. Some mothers have negative feelings towards the unborn baby and want to hurt and punish the baby by, for example, hitting the stomach. The baby is also in danger when the mother uses substances or there is family violence.

## Hard to see.

It is painful to see a baby's distress and suffering. It may invoke such strong feelings that those close by and professionals deny what they see. The parent's story may

also be contradictory to what the worker notices. Bad treatment can nevertheless be seen in the baby.



# A baby is dependent on an adult's ability to identify the baby's symptoms.

Symptoms can be seen in the baby's growth and development, interaction capacities and linguistic and motor development.

A maltreated baby can be withdrawn, expressionless and cheerless. The baby avoids close contact, and contact with the parent may be distressing for the baby. The baby smiles or laughs little. The baby does not express its own needs and, for example, accepts an uncomfortable position, does not ask for food and does not complain

when the nappy is wet. A baby may also withdraw from contact by sleeping more than usual. The baby avoids looking at you and does not make an initiative for contact. The baby's body may be stiff and arch and be tense. The baby may also be floppy and passive, and its skills and development may be below its age.

A single symptom is not a sign of maltreatment. It is important to make observations of the baby and the baby and parents together.

A BABY HAS THE RIGHT TO A SAFE LIFE, GOOD CARE AND NURTURING.

# When you suspect maltreatment of a baby

- Dare to take action! Talk about your observations with the baby's family.
- Contact the child welfare social worker in your region in order to assess the baby's need for child welfare.
- The child welfare social worker will report the offence to the police if necessary.
- Contact a doctor if the baby shows signs of physical violence or the parent tells you about his or her violent behaviour. Do this even if the injuries are mild and do not require treatment. All bruising and fractures in children under one year old need to be clarified. Maltreatment easily repeats itself.
- In case of acute violence or threat of violence, ensure the baby's safety first.
- The parents also need help. Problems get worse if they are not treated. Make yourself aware of services in your regions and offer them to the parents.
- Good directives make intervention easier. It is the duty of authorities to agree on directives and work practices for intervention in case of maltreatment. They must make sure that the flow of information and distribution of work function.

ACCORDING TO THE ACT ON CHILD WELFARE PARAGRAPH 25, THOSE WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES HAVE A DUTY TO NOTIFY THE RESPONSIBLE BODY ALREADY WHEN THEY SUSPECT THAT THE CHILD'S WELFARE IS NOT TAKEN CARE OF OR THE CHILD IS LIVING IN CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH ENDANGER THE CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT.

A BABY CANNOT WAIT.

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HELPING A BABY IS OUR COMMON DUTY.

**The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters** is a nationwide child welfare organization that helps children and families in difficult and unprotected conditions and prevents domestic violence. The federation has long experience of helping babies and their families. We have worked for the benefit of children since 1945.

Contact for further information.



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