



*This advice is for Parish Priests and Parish workers to assist in detecting the characteristics which can identify children and young people at risk of significant harm*

## ADVICE : WHAT CONSTITUTES RISK OF HARM TO CHILDREN?

This document provides advice as to what constitutes a risk of significant harm.

### **Overview**

A child is at risk of significant harm if current concerns exist for their safety, welfare or wellbeing because of the presence, to a significant extent, of any one or more of the following circumstances. These circumstances fall into the broad categories of neglect, abuse and psychological harm.

### **Neglect**

- The child's basic physical or psychological needs are not being met or are at risk of not being met
- The child's parents or other caregivers have not arranged and are unable or unwilling to arrange for the child or young person to receive necessary medical care
- In the case of a child who is required to attend school, the parents or other caregivers have not arranged and are unable or unwilling to arrange for the child to receive an education

### **Abuse and psychological harm**

- The child has been, or is at risk of being, physically or sexually abused or ill-treated
- The child is living in a household where there have been incidents of domestic violence and, as a consequence, the child or young person is at risk of serious physical or psychological harm
- A parent or other care giver has behaved in such a way towards the child that the child has suffered, or is at risk of suffering, serious psychological harm

### **Specific descriptions**

#### **Possible signs a child is suffering from neglect (basic needs are not being met)**

Signs in children include:

- low weight for age and/or failure to thrive and develop
- untreated physical problems
- poor standards of hygiene
- poor complexion and hair texture
- child not adequately supervised for his/her age
- scavenging or stealing food, focus on basic survival
- extended stays at school, public places, other homes
- longs for or indiscriminately seeks adult affection
- poor school attendance

Signs in parents and/or caregivers include:

- inability or unwillingness to provide adequate food, shelter, clothing, medical attention, safe home conditions
- leaving the child without appropriate supervision or abandoning the child
- withholding physical contact or stimulation for prolonged periods
- inability or unwillingness to provide psychological nurturing
- limited understanding of the child's needs
- unrealistic expectations of the child



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### **Possible signs of physical abuse**

Signs in children include:

- bruising, lacerations and welts
- drowsiness, vomiting, fits or pooling of blood in the eyes, which may suggest head injury
- adult bite marks and scratches
- fractures of bones, especially in children under three years old
- dislocations, sprains, twisting
- burns and scalds (including cigarette burns)
- multiple injuries or bruises
- explanation of injury offered by the child is not consistent with their injury
- abdominal pain caused by ruptured internal organs
- swallowing of poisonous substances, alcohol or other harmful drugs

Signs in parents and/or caregivers include:

- frequent visits with the child in their care to health or other services with unexplained or suspicious injuries
- explanation of injury offered by the parent is not consistent with the injury
- family history of violence
- history of their own maltreatment as a child
- use of excessive discipline

### **Possible signs of sexual abuse**

Signs in children include:

- describing or simulating sexual acts
- fear of being with a specific person
- sexual knowledge or behaviour inappropriate for the child's age
- outbursts of anger, damaging property or hurting animals
- sudden unexplained personality changes, mood swings and seeming insecure
- adolescent pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections
- unexplained accumulation of money and gifts

### **Possible signs of psychological harm**

Signs in children include:

- feelings of worthlessness about life and themselves
- inability to value or trust others
- lack of interaction skills necessary for daily functioning
- extreme attention-seeking behaviour
- obsession with pleasing or obeying adults
- taking extreme risks
- persistent running away from home
- eating disorders
- risk taking behaviours - self harm, suicide attempts