

Physical Neglect Scenarios

You are an ER nurse. A mother brings two-year-old Emma to the ER with a scald burn along the head, face, and shoulders. The mother explains to you that Emma pulled a boiling pot of spaghetti from the stove onto herself. That explanation seems to fit the burns. When you ask more details about the incident in order to provide the best medical care for Emma, the mother says she really doesn't know because she was outside mowing the lawn. She said it was a terrible accident, but Emma had been told never to touch anything on the stove and knew better.

The burn itself was accidental (and therefore is unlikely to be considered physical abuse), but it happened because the mother was not providing the level of supervision required by a two-year-old child. Therefore, there is reasonable cause to suspect that the burns were the result of neglect. The lack of necessary care (supervision) seriously endangered the physical health of the child and continues to endanger the child, as the mother has indicated that she expects the child to know how to keep herself safe.

Six-year-old Lindy comes to the child care center where you are a provider and announces to you one day that she is old enough now to stay home alone. By way of proof, she says that she was at home alone the previous night because her mom "went clubbing" with her boyfriend. She was pretty scared, but her mom told her to watch TV and then just go to bed, that she was a big girl now, not a baby. Her mom wasn't home when she fell asleep but was home when she woke up that morning.

There is a lack of necessary care — in this case, supervision. A six-year-old child does not have the cognitive or emotional maturity to care for herself in that situation.

Nine-year-old Luke on your soccer team is distracted and seems to have no energy. When you ask him how he is, he wants to know if you can tell him how someone can find their father. When you talk to Luke some more, you find out his mother sleeps "all the time," that he's been trying to make meals for his five-year-old brother and four-year-old sister, but there's hardly any food left in the house and the money he had found to buy food is all gone now. He doesn't want to get his mom in trouble, but he doesn't know what to do any more. He thought maybe his father would take care of things.

At a minimum, two basic needs are not being met: adequate food and adequate supervision, even though the mother appears to be at home. Luke is trying to carry out his parents' responsibilities. There could be a number of legitimate reasons why the Mom sleeps "all the time," such as illness or depression, but the bottom line is the children's basic needs are not being met. Although Luke appears to be physically OK, the status of the younger children is unknown, and there could be additional serious, even emergent, unmet needs.

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Three-year-old Stevie comes to your child care center. He has limited speech and play skills as compared to the other children his age. When you observe him with his mother, she is affectionate with him but doesn't spend much time directly interacting with him. You are sure he would do better if he received some stimulation at home. You encourage her to set aside time to read him books and play games with him, but you get the impression that she is not going to do that. He appears adequately fed and clothed and has no health problems beyond the normal childhood colds.

Your assessment that Stevie would benefit from his mother teaching, playing and interacting with him could very well be correct, but the absence of that stimulation does not seriously endanger his physical health. His basic needs for care and protection appear to be met, so there appears to be no neglect as defined in the law.