

Child abuse and

Child abuse occurs when an adult causes, or threatens to cause, physical or mental harm to a child. Child abuse includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse as well as neglect, which may include lack of supervision, inadequate physical, medical, or educational care, and abandonment.

Who are abusers?

Abusers can be strangers, family, friends, or neighbors, someone the child knows and trusts. Child abuse is not limited to any one group. It happens in all socio-economic racial, ethnic, and religious sectors. Studies show that most sexual abuse involves no physical damage to the child; the damage comes from the violation of the relationship and has far more long-lasting effects than physical injury.

What abuse does to children:

Children who have been abused not only suffer a wide range of effects from their victimization, but also are at greater risk to be abused again. Abuse and neglect commonly produce feeling of guilt, violation, loss of control, lowered self-esteem

Even those children, who seem to be handling their abuse, are concerned that:

- It will continue to happen
- They did something wrong
- Other relationships might become abusive
- Long-term effects of abuse and neglect

Common problems for abused and neglected children include: emotional difficulties, disruptive behavior, and poor performance in school, vulnerability to further abuse, depression, and suicide attempts. While these problems are not always, obviously linked to the abuse, they must not be overlooked or allowed to develop unchecked.

Long-term studies of low achievers, runaways, substance abusers, prostitutes and incarcerated individuals paint a disturbing picture. Abuse and neglect are consistent and pervasive elements in their backgrounds. Low self-esteem and poor self-concept are ever present.

Knowing this, there can be little doubt that we must commit our energy and resources to preventing, intervening, and treating child abuse and neglect in order that present and future generations have the opportunity they deserve to meet their full potential.

How to respond if a child tells: The trauma of a child reporting abuse is very real. If this happens, the first concern is to remain calm and supportive of the child. Give the child an opportunity to tell you in his or her own way what happened. Do not overreact or criticize in any way.

The child needs to be reassured:

1. That you believe him/her and you are glad she/he has told you
2. That she/he did not do anything wrong
3. That you will do your best to see

that she/he is not hurt again and make every effort to get help.

Do not promise the child that you will do anything specific. You may not be able to keep that promise. Children who report sexual or physical abuse need to be examined by a doctor. Make the child a part of the process. If possible, find a physician the child knows or one who is particularly experienced in abuse cases.

Remember almost without exception, children do not lie about abuse, except to deny that it happened. Remember also the trauma of abuse is long lasting and not always apparent. When a child reports being abused, the process of recovery begins. The next step is to report the abuse to the appropriate authorities and begin the treatment of the child and, whenever possible, of the perpetrator.

Reporting suspected abuse or neglect: The decision to report abuse is always difficult. Most sexual abuse, and virtually all physical and emotional abuse, involves someone known to the child. Interpersonal relationships and community considerations frequently bring hesitation to report.

At these times, it is to remember that the total responsibility for the offense lies with the offender. Reporting protects the child and may ultimately result in getting the offender professional help. A person who reports suspected abuse is not responsible for ruining the offender's life. The person who has the courage and takes the responsibility to report is saving a child and most probably others.

Anyone may report a suspected case of child abuse or child maltreatment. Any suspected case should be reported. The law protects any person, official, or institution that makes a report in good faith (meaning an honest belief that a child is being abused). While reporting child abuse can be difficult, if you do not act on behalf of the child, who will?

What to do after abuse is reported: The degree of impact that abuse has on a child is determined by several factors:

1. The type and severity of the assault
2. The relationship of the offender to the child
3. The duration of the assault situation
4. The reaction of the people around the child after the assault is reported
5. Support available to the child, which enables full recovery.

One of the most important things you can do to aid a child's recovery is to make sure the child knows the offender is responsible for what happened. Parents have a role to play, but a professional can also be very important in helping a child to resolve the many issues which arise following abuse.

It is not true that a child will forget the abuse if the adults do not talk about it nor allow the child to



talk about it. The Incident is very real for the child and can color every aspect of his or her life, whether she/he talks about it or not. Supporting the child to complete the process of recovery should not be undervalued.

Another area of concern is treatment for abusers. This is particularly important with adolescent abusers. Teenagers who abuse others are beginning a lifelong pattern of abuse that can result in hundreds of children being abused. Intervention at the earliest possible time cannot be stressed enough and adolescence is the most successful moment for intervention.

Prevention of Child Abuse:

A large number of girls and boys are being abused across the world. Research has shown that abused and exploited children often become either abused and exploited adolescents and adults or abusers and exploiters themselves.

We need to enable organizations and networks to become powerful advocates for the creation of a culture of prevention of child abuse worldwide. Our commitment to combat sexual abuse of children should be based upon a firm belief in child rights and the urgent need to better protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse in all countries.

It is necessary to address the increase of child abuse and its negative impact on children and society as a whole and act as a catalyst for change; to bring together organizations that share a common concern for prevention of abuse, protection of children's rights and their well-being, and for effective rehabilitation programs. Coalitions generally outweigh what one individual member cannot achieve and serve as a platform for focused action by all interested partners;

coalitions bring together a range of expertise and experiences, enhance the capacity of individual members through the sharing of knowledge, skills and experiences. Coalitions raise awareness in the public at large and also help mobilize funds for child rights activities.

Basic principles of prevention: Children are the first line of defense against abuse. Parents, schools, and organizations can use all the avoidance technology at their disposal, but experience tells us that we are almost always surprised to discover perpetrators in our midst.

Prevention of child abuse can be taught without talking about abuse. Children do not need to be told what abuse is, who the offenders are, how they operate, what they do, or why. Neither do they need to be told that the people they love might hurt them. Rather, we can deal with prevention positively and concretely, giving children the skills they need to act effectively on their own behalf when they are in a potentially abusive situation.

There are times when children can and must be responsible for their own well being, such as when they are alone with a potential abuser. At such times, they need permission to speak up. They need specific techniques to stop what is being done to them. And, they must know they will be believed and supported by the adults in their lives. The best overall defense children have against abuse is:

- A sense of their own abilities
 - The ability to accurately assess and handle a variety of situations
 - Knowing where and how to get help
 - Knowing they will be believed
- Children have a right to be safe without being afraid. Children who have been taught to think for them-

d its prevention



selves are the safest.

Prevention of sexual abuse: Training to prevent sexual abuse begins with children's natural abilities, what they already know, and the experiences they have already had. The fundamental messages in prevention of child abuse by people known to the child include:

1. Your body belongs to you
2. You have a right to say who touches you and how
3. If someone touches you in a way you do not like, in a way that makes you feel funny or uncomfortable inside, or in a way that you think is wrong or that your parents would think is wrong, it is okay to say "no"
4. If the person does not stop, say, "I am going to tell!" and then tell, no matter what
5. If you are asked to keep a secret, say, "No, I am going to tell!"
6. If you have a problem, keep talking about it until someone helps you

Children learn that they can have some control over what hap-

pens to their bodies when we teach them, and when we show them through our own behavior, that their bodies do indeed belong to them. Children, as young as two and three, already know what touch they like and what touch they do not like. Touch they do not like makes them feel uneasy and seems wrong to them. This approach to prevention simply gives them permission to speak up. It teaches them how to speak up effectively and in a way that is appropriate.

Safety with strangers:

Children need to know that strangers are just people they don't know and that they encounter strangers every day of their lives. There is no reason to be afraid, but there are safety rules which should be followed with all strangers when children are not with an adult who is taking care of them (e.g. playing in the front yard or at the park). The concepts and rules for safety around strangers are simple and straightforward and should be taught without fear of horror stories. They can be utilized by children as young as three and should be adapted as children get older.

The rules to follow by a child alone or with friends when approached by a stranger are:

1. Stay an arm's reach away. This is the length of a grown-up's arm plus another step back. If the person continues to approach, keep backing up to maintain the arms reach circle of safety.
2. Don't talk to the person. This includes requests for help, questions, and seemingly simple conversation. Even if the person knows your name, that does not mean s/he knows you.
3. Don't take anything from the person. Not even something that belongs to you or your parents.
4. Don't go anywhere with the person. Even if s/he says it is an emergency, go to someone you know and check it out.
5. If you begin to feel that something is wrong or to feel uncomfortable or afraid, back

up four steps, then turn around and run. Do anything you can to attract attention! Ask for help. Adults cannot tell you are in trouble unless you get their attention and ask for help. Do not get stuck because you failed to follow one or more of the rules and are now in a difficult situation.

Again, in all areas of prevention, the rules and concepts have no value if they remain ideas. Children learn by doing. All the research has shown that these rules must become skills in order to protect children. This means practice, role-playing, and acting out everyday situations. This can be awkward for parents, which is part of the reason that it is so important for schools to participate in this educational process.

Safety in self-care: For all practical purposes, there are times when your children are alone. For example, you are in the shower and someone comes to the door; or you're in the yard and the telephone rings. With only the rarest exceptions, all children are alone - however briefly - at one time or another and when they are alone, they wonder what could happen. Knowing and talking about your children's concerns not only reassures them, but also prepares them to be safer. Setting up a series of guidelines and discussing options for unexpected situations is a good first step.

Answering the telephone

1. Children should not give their name or answer any questions over the telephone unless they are talking with a close friend or family member.
2. If they are home alone, they should say, "My mom (father) is busy, may I take a message?"
3. If a caller refuses to leave a message or is giving the child a hard time, it is all right to hang up the phone.
4. If your child cannot take a message, for whatever reason, ask the person to call back at a specified time.

Answering the door:

Children should keep the door

locked when they are at home alone. Always go to the door when someone knocks or rings. Ask, "Who is it?" Do not open the door for anyone except a member of the family or a friend if you have permission. With your children, establish specific responses for people delivering a package such as, "Please leave it by the door." If a signature is required, "Please come back later" or "Leave it with the neighbor".

Emergencies: Children need to know what is expected of them in an emergency and how to make an emergency call to Emergency Health centers, ambulances, etc. They need to know that all rules are called off in a life-threatening situation and that they have your permission to do whatever needs to be done at the moment to protect themselves or others.

Be prepared - the following list will give you a starting place for family discussion

My name
My mother's name
My father's name
My address
My phone number
My mother's work phone number
My father's work phone number
Police/Fire/Emergency
Doctors
Neighbors/Other resource people
If the phone rings, I will
If somebody comes to the door, I will

I can let the following people in
If there is an emergency, I should

If I get scared, I will
My responsibilities are
Be an advocate

Providing prevention education for children is only the beginning. Each and every one of us has a role to play. Speak up... Recognize that you are an advocate for each and every child you know or with whom you come into contact. If a child is being maltreated and you do not speak up, who will? To report suspected child maltreatment call local services for child protection. ■