

Child Abuse: Identification and Its Prevention



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Opinion

The National Center on Child Abuse reports that 1 out of every 3 girls and 1 out of every 5 boys are victims of some form of abuse by the age of 19. Data also shows that all social, economic, and racial strata are susceptible. Child abuse, especially child sexual abuse, is a difficult subject for everyone. A single allegation of child abuse, whether or not it proves true, can devastate your reputation and destroy your organization. The best way to protect children from abuse, and yourself, your employees and volunteers, and your organization from allegations of child abuse, is to prevent abuse from happening in the first place.

Identifying child abuse

How can you tell if a child has suffered abuse? If Thomas has a bruise on his forehead, does this mean he was beaten up or that he ran into a soccer goal? What about Angela, who has burn marks shaped like gloves on both hands is this a sign of abuse? [1].

Unfortunately, the signs of child abuse are not crystal clear, and some abused children show no outward signs of abuse. But as a general rule, if you notice a sudden change in a child's behavior and that behavioral change is sustained over time, its worth looking into. The behavioral change may or may not be the result of abuse. Likewise, physical signs of sexual abuse do not necessarily mean the child was molested, but certainly warrant investigation [2-5].

General guidelines in identifying the signs of childhood stress and different types of child abuse.

- i. Childhood stress
- ii. Emotional abuse
- iii. Physical abuse
- iv. Sexual abuse

v. Behavioral indicators

- a) Dramatic changes in school performance
- b) Overly aggressive or compliant behavior
- c) Depression
- d) Delinquency or running away from home
- e) Sleep disorders
- f) Eating disorders
- g) Same signs as stress
- h) Thumb sucking, head banging, rocking
- i) Hysteria, phobias, compulsions, hypochondria
- j) Inappropriately adult or infantile behavior
- k) Speech disorders
- l) Talking about, threatening, or attempting suicide
- m) Same signs as stress
- n) Conflicting or changing stories about how injury occurred
- o) Delayed or inappropriate treatment of the injury
- p) Same signs as stress
- q) Reluctance to be left alone with a particular person
- r) Wearing lots of clothes, especially to bed
- s) Creating drawings that show genitals

- t) Fear of touch
- u) Abuse of animals
- v) Excessive or public masturbation
- w) Age-inappropriate sexual play (with themselves, other children, or toys)
- vi. Physical indicators
 - a) Generally no physical indicators
 - b) Generally no physical indicators
 - c) Burns, bruises, or cut in unusual areas, such as the soles of feet, palms of hands, back, abdomen, face, neck, back of arms
 - d) Multiple burns, bruises, or cuts in various stages of healing
 - e) Physical indicators of sexual abuse, if present at all, tend to be temporary
 - f) Difficulty in walking
 - g) Torn, stained or bloody underwear
 - h) Genital pain or itching
 - i) Bruised or bleeding external genitals
 - j) Sexually transmitted diseases
- vii. Physical indicators
 - a) Glove-shaped burns on the hands or socks on the feet from being forced to bathe in scalding water
 - b) Adult sized bite marks unexplained fractures
 - c) Pregnancy

Identifying potential child abusers

Just as there is no foolproof way to identify an abused child, there is no sure way to identify people who abuse children. Statistically, among abuse cases reported, women are more likely to neglect and emotionally abuse children, while men are more likely to physically and sexually abuse children. But adults are not the only ones who abuse children. Many cases of abuse, especially sexual abuse, occur when children molest other children [5-7].

Child abusers come in every size, shape, color, age, economic group, and religion. Often they are people you like and respect people who you can't imagine would ever hurt a child. Yet the one common characteristic of child abusers is that they are generally under stress and cannot cope with that stress in an acceptable way.

Preventing child abuse

The best way to protect children from abuse is to prevent abuse from happening in the first place. You can't predict when

child abuse will happen, but with careful planning and hiring practices, you can make it more difficult for abuse to occur.

Screening applicants

Preventing child abuse starts by thoroughly screening your organization's job applicants and volunteers before you allow them to work with you. At a minimum, you should

1. Have the applicant complete a formal, written, job application.
2. Conduct a face-to-face interview with the applicant.
3. Check at least three references.
4. Check with past employers and volunteer organizations.
5. Check your state's sex-offender registries (available in many states on the Internet).
6. Check your state's criminal records.

Note: If the applicant has recently moved to your state, also check the records of states in which they have previously resided.

If the applicant will be left unsupervised with a child for long periods of time, you should also conduct a comprehensive, national background check, which includes an FBI fingerprints check. This can take anywhere from 6 weeks to 6 months a complete set of good, readable fingerprints speeds the process considerably. Bear in mind that many child abusers have no previous criminal record. Because of this, the face-to-face interview and reference checks are among the best tools to evaluate a potential employee or volunteer.

Interviewing applicants

During the interview, you want to find out how the applicant feels about and relates to children. Be wary of applicants who want to save the world, idealize children and childhood, think adults should relate to children as peers, or want to spend a lot of time alone with children. To find the best fit for each position, ask every applicant the same questions and keep a record of their responses. Ask open-ended questions, such as:

1. How would you discipline a child who misbehaves?
2. Why are you interested in this position?
3. What kind of supervisory environment do you prefer?
4. Checking references

A managerial-level employee should check every applicant's references. Don't rely on references from friends and former co-workers ask the applicant to provide the names of people who have directly supervised and observed the applicant at work. In addition to administrative questions (when did they work for you, why did they leave, what was their position), ask open-ended questions like these:

1. What skills do they have in working with young children?
2. Do they have realistic expectations for children's behavior?
3. How do they handle frustration or criticism on the job?
4. Have you seen them discipline a child? What did they do?
5. How do they communicate with parents?
6. Have there been any complaints about their care of children?
7. Would you rehire them to work with young children?
8. Do you feel there are any problems or conditions (such as alcohol or drug abuse, criminal activity, or history of mistreating children) that would endanger children placed in their care or interfere with their ability to do the job?

Checking criminal records

Depending on your organization's mission, the fact that an applicant has a criminal history may not necessarily disqualify her from working with you. For example, if your organization employs former offenders to mentor at-risk youth, you will allow applicants with certain types of criminal convictions to work in your organization. You decide what's right for your organization and how much risk you are willing to take. As a common-sense rule, you should never employ someone who has been convicted of physically or sexually abusing children or any other crime against children. You would also screen out applicants with a history of violent or sexually exploitative behavior.

You should also take certain factors and circumstances into account, such as how recently they committed the offense, how old they were at the time of the offense, what special conditions may have led up to the offense (peer pressure, joining a gang out of fear), and the probability they will continue the same type of criminal behavior.

Establishing policies to protect children

Your organization should adopt policies that make it difficult for abuse to occur, such as

1. Prohibiting or limiting staff members from being alone with a child, especially where they are out of view of other adults.
2. Providing separate sleeping accommodations for adults and children during overnights.
3. Ensuring at least two adults accompany children on overnights or outings.

Training staff

It's imperative that your staff understands what conduct is appropriate and what is inappropriate. Common sense dictates

that any activity that is even the slightest bit sexual in nature is inappropriate. Inappropriate conduct includes jokes, comments, kissing, and touching. It's also essential to train your staff to recognize and report suspected abuse.

Educating children

You can add abuse education to your existing safety training programs or hire outside resources to conduct the training. Children are often reluctant to report abuse because they fear no one will believe them, blame them for the abuse, were threatened or bribed to keep silent, are embarrassed or ashamed, or are worried that they will get themselves or a loved one into trouble.

It's important to tell children that:

1. No one has the right to hurt them or touch them inappropriately.
2. They can say "no" to requests that make them uncomfortable, even if the request is from a family member or friend.
3. They must tell a trusted adult about any form of abuse and that they will not be punished for telling.
4. The abuse is not their fault.

Designing and using facilities

Your facility, when it is properly designed and used, can make it difficult for a potential abuser to mistreat the children in your care. Some guidelines follow.

Don't let visitors, including relatives of staff members and volunteers, wander around the facility unsupervised.

1. Have all visitors sign in, including parents.
2. Lock doors to closets, rooms, and other areas when they are not in use.
3. Install and maintain bright lights in hallways, walkways, and parking areas.
4. Don't allow digital cameras in changing areas and bathrooms.
5. Prune trees and shrubs to prevent potential abusers from hiding behind them and attacking a child.
6. Provide separate shower facilities or schedule different shower times for staff and children.
7. Design toilet facilities for young children that provide privacy for children and permit observation of adult helpers. Some facilities use child-sized stalls that shield the child but not the adult.

Investigating and reporting suspected child abuse

You must investigate and report each incident of suspected child abuse as quickly as possible. While the incident is under

investigation, or it is critical to prevent all contact between the child and the alleged abuser.

Investigating the incident

When a staff member or child reports abuse, it's essential not to panic. You want to reassure the child that he or she isn't to blame for the abuse, and that it won't happen again. You also need to find out what happened. The best way to do this is by asking open-ended questions, which can't be answered by a "yes" or "no." Take the child to a quiet place that is within view of other adults and ask questions such as "Tell me what happened," or "Where were you?"

Note: Do not examine the child or conduct a detailed investigation. This is best left to child protective services and other authorities.

Reporting the incident

Who reports incidents of suspected abuse?

In most states, childcare workers are legally required to report any incident of suspected child abuse. The authorities assume your report is made in good faith, so even if the report proves false, you will not be held civilly or criminally responsible for making it. Because it is so important to quickly and accurately report suspected abuse, many organization directors prepare these reports themselves, rather than delegate this responsibility to other staff members.

Note: You should report all incidents of suspected child abuse, even if you receive an anonymous letter or phone call reporting abuse. Too many children have been hurt because no one followed up on an anonymous tip.

Where are incidents reported?

Each state has specific agencies that receive and investigate reports of suspected child abuse and neglect. Typically, you must report incidents to child protective services within a Department of Social Services, Department of Human Resources, or Division of Family and Children's Services. In some states, police departments also may receive reports.

It's helpful to establish a relationship with child protective services and other agencies before an incident happens. Many organizations set up a memorandum of understanding that incorporates the legal requirements and your organization's internal reporting procedures. Both you and the agency director sign the memorandum and each organization keeps a copy on file.

What is the internal reporting procedure?

In addition to legally required reports of child abuse, your organization should have an internal reporting procedure. At a minimum, you should

1. Notify your organization's legal counsel.
2. Notify your organization's insurance provider.

3. Write a report detailing the suspected incident

Managing the media

If someone in your organization is accused of child abuse, managing the media is imperative. The vast majority of news people are sensitive and interested in getting the facts; however, the media can easily paint a negative picture of your organization if you give them the tools to do so. You can prevent negative media coverage by having a media crisis management plan in place before an incident occurs.

Media crisis management plan

Your plan should designate your organization's spokesperson. It should also clearly convey how you will:

1. Conduct your internal investigation.
2. Determine what you will say to the media (what should and shouldn't be disclosed).
3. Provide information to your staff and the media (for example, through written responses, interviews).
4. Maintain a communications log for follow-up actions.

Spokesperson's responsibilities

The spokesperson's primary responsibility is to present your organization's message to the media. The spokesperson need not be the director, but should have both credibility and knowledge of your organization. All media questions and reporters should be directed to the spokesperson; other members of your staff should not talk to the media without speaking with the spokesperson first. The spokesperson you choose should have previous experience with the media and with giving interviews.

Interview do's and don'ts

1. Do respond to the media's requests for information as soon as possible.
2. Do state the facts clearly and concisely.
3. Do show concern for those involved.
4. Do get your message across in the first few sentences.
5. Do correct any false statements or misinterpretations a reporter may make.
6. Don't say "No comment." The audience assumes guilt. A better response is something like, "We're helping the authorities investigate the incident, and we're still gathering the facts."
7. Don't ask to speak "off the record." Everything you say to a reporter can be quoted.
8. Don't keep talking just to fill the silence. Deliver your message, and then wait for the next question.

9. Don't make up an answer. If you don't know the answer, find out and then call the reporter back.

Resources

Child Welfare Information Gateway

Prevent Child Abuse America

Strengthening Families Washington

Washington State Court Appointed Special Advocates

Children's Hospital & Regional Medical Centre.

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