

Save a Child: Know How to Identify and Report Child Abuse¹

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Child abuse is a real problem and a concern for all persons working with children. Nationally, 3.6 million cases of child abuse were reported and an estimated 905,000 children were confirmed victims of some form of abuse in 2006 (USDHHS 2006). American Indian and African American children had a rate of abuse above 20 incidents per thousand, almost twice that of their white counterparts. However, 53.6% of child abuse victims are white whereas only 25.5% are African-American, 11.5% are Hispanic, and 1.7% are Native American or Alaska Native (USDHHS, 2003). Also, preliminary data from a University of Florida study on child welfare indicates that given an identical family situation, abuse is more likely to be substantiated among black than white children (Askew Institute, 2006).

In the 2004–2005 fiscal year, a reported 115,561 cases of abuse (selected from 190,489 allegations) were verified in Florida (FDCF, 2008). The greatest tragedy of child abuse is summarized in this troubling statistic: an estimated 1,530 children died nationally as a result of child abuse in 2006

(USDHHS 2006), a number that has increased by 130 over the past five years (Bilchik, 2006). Annually in Florida, about 110 deaths are the result of abuse or neglect (Askew Institute, 2006).

People who work with children may at some point in their careers have to report child abuse. It is important that you be able to recognize the symptoms of abuse, and be able to contact the appropriate authorities. By reporting abuse, you may save a child's life or prevent serious injury.

This publication discusses child abuse laws and procedures for reporting abuse. It also contains information about different types of abuse and how to identify abused or neglected children. Characteristics listed here are general and intended as guidelines. A child or family may exhibit many warning signs of abuse, though no abuse has or will occur.

Florida law requires child care providers, physicians, teachers, law enforcement officers, and any other person having reason to believe a child under the age of eighteen is being abused, to report

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abuse. Failure to report suspected abuse is a misdemeanor.

There are many ways to report abuse. You may call the Department of Children and Families (DCF) **Central Abuse Hotline at 1-800-96ABUSE (1-800-962-2873). The TDD number is 1-800-453-5145.** DCF has developed an online process of reporting that is very useful in filing your report. It is located on the Web at <http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/abuse/report/>. More information about child protection in Florida is available from the DCF Web site at <http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/abuse/>. It is not the responsibility of the person reporting the suspected abuse to determine if abuse has occurred. An investigator will be assigned to determine this. Florida has an immunity law as well. This law (Florida Statutes V §§ 39.203) protects you from lawsuits that could arise from reporting of the abuse so long as the incident is reported in "good faith." **Remember: Report child abuse to protect the child, not to punish the suspected abuser.**

Indicators of Physical Abuse

Physical child abuse is the intentional harming of a child by an adult. This harm may include excessive shaking, bruising, beating (for example, fists, belt, board, wire hanger), or burning (for example, scalding water, cigarette butts). Conservative estimates put physical child abuse at 47,000 cases annually (USDHHS, 2003).

A common myth classifies child abuse as a problem of the poor. However, child abusers may be from any socioeconomic class, race, educational background, or religion.

Physically abused children can be identified by various means. Some of the most common indicators of physical abuse include the following.

Physical signs of physical abuse

- Cuts, bruises, or broken bones in different stages of healing
- Burns

- Unrealistic explanations for how injuries occurred

Behavioral signs of physical abuse

- Aggressive or disruptive behaviors
- Excessively passive, e.g., shrinks at the approach of adults
- Fear of going home or of certain people

Indicators of Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is sexual contact with a child by another person who may use force or threats, or exploits a position of authority. Like physical abuse, sexual abuse is not linked to any particular class or cultural group. For example, recent attention has been given to child-on-child sexual abuse which most likely is the case of a victimized child reenacting his/her abuse upon another child.* The sexual abuser is most often a parent, guardian, relative, family friend, or someone the child knows. Acts of sexual abuse perpetrated by strangers are usually single episodes with many different children, while familial sexual abuse usually involves multiple occurrences to the same child over a period of months or years. The common characteristics of a sexually abused child include the following.

Physical signs of sexual abuse

- Trauma to the mouth, anus, or vagina (may include difficulty walking or sitting)
- Anal or vaginal bleeding
- The presence of semen or an enlarged vagina
- Painful urination
- Inability to control bowels

Behavioral signs of sexual abuse

- Inappropriate sex play with peers or sexual knowledge unusual for age (may be revealed in drawings or stories)
- Inappropriate focus on genitals of self or others

- Reversion to more childlike behaviors (such as crying for no apparent reason)
- Withdrawal, depression, change in personality

Indicators of Child Neglect

Child neglect is a condition in which a child's basic needs for food, shelter, clothing, prompt medical attention, and emotional support are not met. Unlike physical and sexual abuse, child neglect is a result of what parents or guardians **fail to do for** their children, not what they **do to** their children. This is the most common form of child abuse, representing 60.9% of all child abuse cases (USDHHS, 2005).

Similar to physical and sexual abusers, persons who neglect their children may be from any socioeconomic class, race, sex, religion, or educational background. Common indicators of child neglect include the following.

Physical signs of child neglect

- Child is inappropriately dressed for weather
- Extreme hunger indicated by a child
- Unkempt appearance of a child
- A child has not seen a physician in a timely manner for an illness

Behavioral signs of child neglect

- Extreme misbehavior of a child
- A child gives excessive attention to others (for example, very "clingy" behavior)

Reporting Child Abuse or Neglect

Once you suspect abuse or neglect, you need to contact the proper authorities. Florida has the Florida Department of Children and Families. This organization is staffed by trained individuals who will take your call, and act upon the information you give them. Before you call, be sure you have the following information about the child:

- The child's name, age, address, and phone number

- The day you first noticed the abuse or neglect
- Any marks on the child and location of the marks
- Any other pertinent symptoms
- Any other pertinent information

After a report is taken, a priority is given to it, either immediate or 24 hour. All investigations are to commence within 24 hours of receiving the report. An investigator will interview the child and other sources to determine if abuse has occurred. (Just because you find marks on a child does not mean he or she was abused.)

If abuse or neglect has occurred, the caseworker will attempt find out who is abusing or neglecting the child and/or refer the case to law enforcement. If it is a parent or guardian, the caseworker will establish the level of risk to the child and determine if separation is appropriate. Separation is usually temporary and requires a court order. When the home situation is stabilized, the child and his or her parent(s) may be reunited. Only in extreme situations is the child removed permanently from a home. DCF attempts to keep the family together, but the safety of the child comes first.

Summary

Abuse and neglect may happen to any child at any time by anyone. Contact your local Children and Family Services office for more information, training, and special local programs that protect children and strengthen families. By recognizing some common symptoms of abuse and neglect, you can bring about early intervention to alleviate a child's suffering and provide treatment for an abusive person.

On a positive note, Florida is believed to have "one of the most innovative child abuse systems in the entire country" based on their creation (unique to Florida) of state-funded child protection teams (Askew Institute, 2006, p. 14). Child protection teams have a goal of investigating suspected cases of child abuse and neglect and making appropriate referrals to service providers. For example, a multidisciplinary child protection team (within the Children's Medical Services Center) at the University

of Florida involves attorneys, pediatricians, psychologists, medical assistants, mental health counselors, social workers, and information systems specialists. This team serves 2 districts in the DCF and 16 North Central Florida counties.

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http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm#can

Endnotes

*Child-on-child sexual abuse still needs to be reported the same way as other forms of abuse. Make sure to note the age of the child perpetrator as a case involving a child 12 years old or younger will be handled differently than a child aged 13 and older.

Table 1. Selected State and National Child Abuse Prevention Organizations**The Florida Central Abuse Hotline**

(Voice) 1-800-96ABUSE (1-800-962-2873)

(TDD) 1-800-453-5145

Report abuse online:

<http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/abuse/report/>

Information for Mandated reporters:

<http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/abuse/publications/mandatedreporters.pdf>

National Exchange Club

350 Central Ave.

Toledo, OH 43606

Phone: 419-535-3232

Toll-free: 1-800-XCHANGE (1-800-924-2643)

E-mail: nechq@aol.com

<http://www.nationalexchangeclub.com/>

Prevent Child Abuse America

200 S. Michigan Avenue

17th Floor

Chicago, IL 60604-2404

Phone: 312-663-3520

Fax: 312-939-8962

E-mail: mailbox@preventchildabuse.org

<http://www.preventchildabuse.org/index.html>

Parents Anonymous[®], Inc.

675 West Foothill Blvd., Suite 220

Claremont, CA 91711-3475

Phone: 909-621-6184

E-mail: Parentsanonymous@parentsanonymous.org

<http://www.parentsanonymous.org/palIndex10.html>

Child Welfare Information Gateway (formerly, the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information)

Children's Bureau/ACYF

1250 Maryland Avenue, SW

Eighth Floor

Washington, DC 20024

Phone: 703-385-7565

Toll-free: 1-800-394-3366

E-mail: info@childwelfare.gov

<http://www.childwelfare.gov>

Childhelp USA National Headquarters

15757 N 78th St.

Scottsdale, AZ 85260

Toll-free: 1-800-422-4453

<http://www.childhelpusa.org/>