



American Humane Fact Sheet

Guidelines for Helping Children Experiencing Abuse or Neglect

Everyone who has a relationship with a child plays an important role in maintaining the child's safety. It is important to recognize your vital role and learn how to help a child you suspect is abused or neglected.

If you suspect that a child is a victim of abuse and you are unsure whether the child's situation has been reported to child protective services (CPS), you should report your suspicions to your local CPS agency. Refer to the Fact Sheet *What Should I Know about Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect?* to learn about reporting suspected child abuse or neglect.

What Happens Once a Report Is Made?

After receiving a report of child abuse or neglect, CPS likely will begin an investigation. Occasionally, CPS will determine that a report is not child abuse, or that there is not enough evidence or information to investigate the report. In these instances, CPS will usually refer the family to another agency that will provide them with necessary services (e.g., counseling, parenting skills classes, substance abuse programs). Depending on the laws in your state and your relationship with the child, you may have the opportunity to communicate with the CPS worker regarding the child's progress. Educators and school personnel, in particular, are an excellent resource and may be asked to share additional information to help determine the facts of a case and develop a treatment plan for the child and family. Any party discussing a child abuse case must ensure confidentiality, since details of a case may be shared only with appropriate parties as designated by law. This precaution protects both the child and family from rumors, judgments, and stereotyping that may further isolate and alienate them, and thus negatively affect efforts to help.

Should You Still Have Contact With the Family?

Most likely, you will continue to have regular contact with the family after a report has been made. Keep in mind that you are just as important to the family's recovery as you are to the child's. Appropriate interactions with parents who are

suspected of child abuse or neglect will have a positive influence on the family's ability to recover. Following are guidelines for interacting with the child's family.

- Be objective and supportive. Remember that most parents want to be good parents but may need additional help, encouragement, and guidance.
- Listen. Do not blame, accuse, or make judgments about the family.
- Offer help or assistance to the family (e.g., babysitting, grocery shopping, carpooling).
- Limit conversations to the activities that involve you; it is not your responsibility to investigate suspected child abuse or neglect.
- Address the family in a manner that is consistent with your role or relationship with the family. If you are an educator, be professional and objective. If you are a friend, family member, or neighbor, be friendly, helpful, supportive, and understanding. Do not allow yourself to be placed in an adversarial role if the parents become defensive, argumentative, accusatory, or upset.
- Encourage parents and provide them with resource information about educational programs on parenting, job skills, and child development; programs and activities for children; and counseling, alcohol/drug abuse, or adult education and enrichment programs. (You can even offer to join them and take advantage of the opportunity to learn new skills.)

Remember, families experiencing abuse or neglect issues are often under a great deal of stress in multiple areas of their lives. Your interaction, involvement, or support can be an important stress reducer to the child and parents.

The following tips can help you develop a nurturing relationship with any child who may be suffering from negative self-concepts or especially abuse or neglect. Remember, children need positive adult role models. Your warmth, empathy, and interest will enable the child to see adults in positive, supportive, and caring roles.



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Listen

- Be an approachable, patient, and supportive listener. Listen without being critical or negative toward the child or the child's parents.
- Show that you understand and believe what the child says, even if it is difficult. Make sure to not blame, punish, or accuse the child of doing anything wrong.
- Encourage the child to talk freely, but do not pressure the child to self-disclose or reveal his or her experiences of abuse or neglect.

Empathize

- Validate the child's feelings, emotions, and experiences. Do not belittle or minimize the child's feelings.
- Affirm the child's decision to confide in you. Tell the child that he or she is doing the right thing by talking to you. Let the child know that you are there for him or her and want to help.
- Assure the child often that he or she is not to blame. Child victims may believe that the abuse or neglect is their fault.
- Don't overreact. Stay calm. Fear and anger are normal reactions, but you may frighten the child and prevent him or her from confiding in you in the future.
- Do not talk negatively about the abuser in front of the child. Remember that abused children may be very loyal to their abusers; underneath other feelings they may have, they love their parents and want to be loved and wanted by them.

Be a positive role model

- Help improve the child's self-esteem. Give a lot of positive feedback and reinforcement. As often as possible, tell the child how he or she positively contributes to your life, the child's family, and the world. Tell the child about his or her potential and what he or she has to offer, and sincerely tell the child that he or she is good, smart, and kind.
- Teach conflict resolution. Abused or neglected children may be unfamiliar with non-violent ways of dealing with conflict.
- When a child acts in ways that seem strange, remember to look for the feelings behind the actions. Children may try to protect themselves from their negative feelings by pretending those feelings do not exist. Also, they may seek your attention through negative behaviors because they do

not know how to gain your attention using positive ones. Look for opportunities to encourage and reinforce positive behavior.

Promote positive interaction

- Do not display pity, over-focus attention, or treat abused children differently from others. Children who have been the victims of abuse or neglect want to be normal and feel like other children.
- Foster the child's relationships with peers by encouraging extracurricular and school-related activities.
- Build confidence. Allow children to have possessions of their own (e.g., desk or work space, books, backpack, toys) and give them resources and opportunities to be successful at taking care of their responsibilities.

All these acts can reinforce a child's resiliency and sense of well-being. Keep in mind, however, that these acts do not replace informing CPS if you suspect a child is being abused or neglected. You may still need to make a report if you feel a child's safety is at risk.

How do you find out more about child abuse or neglect?

Contact **American Humane** at (800) 227-4645 for additional information about child abuse or neglect or for help identifying local resources for at-risk children and families.

Resources

American Humane Association. (1994). *Twenty years after CAPTA: A portrait of the child protective services system*. Englewood, CO: American Humane Association.

Children, Youth, & Families Department, Child Care Services Bureau. (1998). *Reporting child abuse – it's everyone's responsibility*. South Deerfield, MA: Channing L. Bete Co., Inc.

Erickson, E.L., A.W. McEvoy, and N.D. Colucci, Jr. (1979). *Child abuse and neglect: A guidebook for educators and community leaders*. Holmes Beach, FL: Learning Publications, Inc.

National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. (1992). *The role of educators in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.