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Child Abuse and Child Care

While the vast majority of child care is provided by warm, capable individuals intent on providing a safe, secure, and healthy place for children, there are occasional incidents of child abuse in child care. Child care providers also occasionally discover a child who has been abused by a parent or other caregiver.

Listen to Children

When a young child spontaneously makes comments or statements that relate to possible abuse, it is important to listen to what the child is saying. Often such statements are made by the child in a comfortable setting and usually to parents or other trusted adults. Listen calmly and respectfully. Many children mistakenly believe they deserve the abuse. If adults show shock, horror, or disbelief, the child may withhold information and keep it secret for a long time. Generally, it should be assumed that children, especially preschoolers, do not make up stories about this topic.

Do not try to force words or images on a child in an effort to get more information. Make careful note of what the child tells you in his or her own words. As soon as possible, write down what you heard and record your observations so that you can report things as accurately as possible.

If you report suspected abuse, you do not need to prove that it occurred. A report is a request for an investigation. Child protection workers are trained to assess abusive situations, identify potential problems, and ensure the child's safety.

Making Reports

Child abuse is against the law. Every state has mandatory reporting laws that require professionals who teach or care for children to report suspected abuse. Registered family and group child care providers and all employees of licensed child care centers are required by Iowa law to report suspected child abuse. Parents, although not mandatory reporters, should report any suspected abuse occurring in child care to their local office of the Department of Human Services.

Children rely on adults to report suspected abuse. If you know or suspect child abuse or neglect, you have a social and legal responsibility to report it to your local child protection agency. Remember that a person who in good faith reports a suspected case of child abuse has legal immunity from liability. The source of child abuse information is kept confidential, if at all possible.

Definitions of Child Abuse

Generally, legal definitions of child abuse include physical abuse, denial of critical care (neglect), or sexual abuse. The three types of child abuse are defined as follows:

Physical abuse Any nonaccidental physical injury or injury that is inconsistent with the explanation given for it suffered by a child as the result of an act or omission by the person responsible for the care of the child. This includes fractures, burns, bruises, welts, cuts, and internal injuries. Physical abuse often occurs in the name of discipline or punishment, and ranges from a slap of the hand to use of objects such as straps, belts, kitchen utensils, electrical cords, and pipes.

Denial of critical care (neglect) The failure on the part of a person responsible for the care of a child to provide for the adequate food, shelter, clothing, emotional support, or other care necessary for the child's health and welfare that places the child in a life- or health-threatening situation.

Sexual abuse The commission of a sexual offense with or to a child through the acts or omissions of the person responsible for the care of the child. Sexual offenses include sexual abuse in the first, second, and third degree, detention in a brothel, lascivious acts, indecent exposure, indecent contact, incest, sexual exploitation, assault with intent to commit sexual abuse, or child prostitution.

Close observation of a child will generally uncover signals that abuse has occurred. These signals can include physical signs and behavior changes.

Physical Signs of Possible Child Abuse

Physical abuse

- Abrasions, bruises, lacerations, welts
- Burns, scalds
- Reddening of surface tissue lasting more than 24 hours

Neglect (denial of critical care)

- Underweight appearance, poor growth pattern, e.g., small in stature, failure to thrive
- Consistent hunger, poor hygiene, inappropriate dress
- Consistent lack of supervision, especially in dangerous activities or for long periods
- Unattended physical problems or medical needs
- Abandonment
- Abdominal distention
- Bald patches on the scalp

Sexual abuse

- Difficulty in walking or sitting
- Torn, stained, or bloody underclothing
- Pain, swelling, or itching in genital area
- Pain on urination
- Bruises, bleeding, or lacerations in external genitalia, vaginal, or anal areas
- Vaginal/penile discharge

Possible Behavioral Changes

Children who have been abused sometimes show changes in their attitudes or behaviors. However, changes in behavior can be caused by other factors. It

is important to understand the basis for changes. Be observant and try to determine the cause. The following are possible signs.

Physical abuse

- Wariness of adult contact
- Behavioral extremes—aggressiveness or withdrawal
- Inappropriate or precocious maturity
- Vacant or frozen stare
- Poor self-concept
- Apprehension when other children cry
- Indiscriminate seeking of affection

Neglect (denial of critical care)

- Fatigue or listlessness
- Whispering speech
- Expressionless face

Sexual abuse

- Frequent touching or fondling of genitals or masturbation
- Inappropriate sexual expression with trusted adults
- “Clinginess,” fear of separation
- Excessive bathing
- Reenactment of abuse using dolls, drawings, or friends
- Avoidance of certain staff, relatives, or friends
- Neglected appearance

What to Do

If you think a child may have been abused, call the Iowa Child Abuse Hotline, 1-800-362-2178, and cooperate fully with the investigation. If an investigation discloses that your child has been mistreated, follow through on recommendations for treatment.

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