



## Guidelines for Helping Children Experiencing Abuse or Neglect

Every adult involved in the life of a child plays a critical role in helping maintain that child's safety. It is important to recognize your vital role and learn how to help protect the children in your life from abuse and neglect.

If you suspect that a child is a victim of abuse or neglect and you are unsure whether the child's situation has been reported to child protective services (CPS), you should report your concerns to your local CPS agency. Refer to *What Should I Know about Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect?*, another fact sheet distributed by the American Humane Association, 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 will use that information, along with any previous history of involvement with the family, in order to determine the best course of action. If CPS determines that the report does not meet the legal standards of child abuse or neglect, or there is not enough evidence or information to investigate the report, CPS will usually refer the family to another agency that will provide the family with appropriate services (e.g., counseling, parenting skills classes, substance abuse programs). Alternatively, the information you share might lead CPS to begin a family assessment or investigation. Depending on the laws in your state and your relationship with the child, you may have the opportunity to communicate with a 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 adhere to the principles of confidentiality, since details of a case may be shared only with appropriate parties as designated by law. This protection by the law protects both the child and family from rumors, judgments and stereotyping that may further isolate and alienate them, and thus negatively affect intervention efforts.

### Should You Still Have Contact With the Family?

Depending on the nature of your relationship with the child or family, you might continue to have regular

contact with the family after a report has been made. Please know 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. The 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.
- Be an active listener. Do not blame, accuse or make judgments about family members or their situations.
- Offer your support in any way in which you feel comfortable. Families in these situations can greatly benefit from social support, which could include anything from babysitting to carpooling to just offering to listen.
- Limit your 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 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, if this seems appropriate given the nature of your relationship. (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 for the child and for the parents.



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The following tips can help you develop a nurturing relationship with any child who may be suffering from negative self-esteem or who is being abused or neglected. Children need positive adult role models; therefore, your warmth, empathy and interest can help a child see adults in positive, supportive and caring roles.

### 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.
- Let the child know that you are there for him or her to talk to openly, should he or she wish to do so. Leaving an open line of communication is much more beneficial to the child than pressuring him or her to self-disclose or reveal his or her experiences of abuse or neglect before he or she is ready to talk about it.

### Empathize

- Validate the child's feelings, emotions and experiences. Do not belittle or minimize the child's feelings; he or she has those feelings for a reason.
- Affirm the child's decision to confide in you. Tell the child that he or she is doing the right thing by talking to an adult whom he/she trusts. Let the child know that you are there for him or her and want to help keep him/her safe.
- 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 if you become agitated.
- Do not talk negatively about the abuser in front of the child. Remember that child victims of abuse may be very loyal to their abusers, especially if the abuser is a parent. Despite the pain they may feel as a result of the abuse, many children still love their parents and want to be loved and wanted by them.

### Be a Positive Role Model

- Provide a lot of positive feedback and reinforcement to help build the child's self-esteem. As often as possible, tell the child how he or she positively contributes to your life, the child's family and the world. Talk about the child's potential and what he or she has to offer, and sincerely tell the child that he or she is good, smart and kind.
- Help the child learn conflict resolution skills by teaching or modeling them. Children who have been abused or neglected 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 pity, overly-focus attention on or treat children who have experienced abuse or neglect differently from others with whom you are involved. Children who have been the victims of abuse or neglect want to be seen as "normal" and feel like other children.
- Foster the child's relationships with peers by encouraging extracurricular and school-related activities.
- Help build the child's 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. Your first responsibility as a trusted adult is to make a report of your concern to CPS if you feel a child's safety is at risk.



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### 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. You can also visit our website at [www.americanhumane.org](http://www.americanhumane.org) for more information and free resources.

### Resources

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

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., McEvaoy, A. W, and Colucci, N. D., 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.

American Humane is a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting children and animals from abuse, neglect and exploitation. For more information or to lend your support, please visit [www.americanhumane.org](http://www.americanhumane.org) or call (800) 227-4645.