

## Build a Prosperous North Carolina by Supporting Nurturing Environments for Children

If our society is to prosper in the future, we must make sure our children have safe, supportive environments where they can grow socially, emotionally, and physically. When children are abused or neglected their opportunity for healthy development is undermined by toxic stress that damages the developing architecture of their brains. This damage weakens the foundation that future development is built on and is traumatic and long term, resulting in physical, mental, and behavioral problems later in life. When we take the time to respond to suspicions of abuse and neglect, we ensure families get the support they need and children's basic foundation for future success is solid. A solid foundation will reap many rewards later on as children grow into successful, contributing members of our community.

The information in this booklet is designed to help you prevent child abuse and neglect by explaining:

- what child abuse and neglect are,
- how to respond to suspicions of abuse and neglect,
- how to refer a family for support services,
- and what happens after a referral is made.



# Recognizing and Responding



## What is Child Abuse and Neglect?

Child abuse can be defined as a non-accidental or substantial risk of injury or pattern of injuries to a child inflicted or allowed to be inflicted by a parent, guardian, caretaker, or custodian. Child abuse includes:

- **Physical Abuse** – Physical abuse is generally defined as "any non-accidental physical injury to the child" and can include striking, kicking, burning, or biting the child, or any action that results in a physical impairment of the child.
- **Sexual Abuse** – Sexual abuse is any sexual behavior imposed on a juvenile. This involves a range of activities, including fondling the genital area, masturbation, oral sex, or vaginal or anal penetration by a finger, penis, or other object. It also includes exhibitionism, child pornography, and use of suggestive behaviors or comments.
- **Emotional Abuse** – Emotional abuse is expressing attitudes or behaviors toward a child that create serious emotional or psychological damage as evidenced by the juvenile's severe anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or aggressive behavior towards self or others.
- **Neglect** – Neglect is frequently defined as the failure of a parent or other person with responsibility for the child to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision such that the child's health, safety, and well-being are threatened with harm.



### Signs of Possible Sexual Abuse

- Exhibiting sexual behaviors that are not appropriate for the child's age
- A detailed and sophisticated understanding of sexual behavior
- Reversion to behaviors such as bed-wetting, speech loss, and thumb-sucking
- Sleep disturbances or nightmares
- Pain, itching, bruising, or bleeding in the genital area
- Venereal disease
- Frequent urinary tract or yeast infections

Sexually abused older children may also:

- Exhibit delinquent or aggressive behaviors
- Show signs of depression
- Display self-injurious behaviors such as substance abuse, self-mutilation, suicide attempts, prostitution, or running away

### Signs of Possible Physical Abuse

- Unexplained bruises in various stages of healing
- Self-destructive behaviors
- Welts, human bite marks, bald spots
- Unexplained burns – especially cigarette burns or glove-like burns
- Unexplained fractures, injuries, or abrasions
- Nervousness, hyperactivity, aggressiveness, disruptive and destructive behaviors
- Unusual wariness of physical contact
- Fear of parent or caretaker
- Lack of expressed emotion
- Unduly shy, withdrawn, and passive

### Signs of Possible Emotional Abuse

- Speech disorders
- Delayed physical or emotional development
- Ulcers, asthma, severe allergies
- Habit disorders such as sucking or rocking
- Unduly passive and undemanding
- Very low self-esteem
- Extremely demanding, aggressive, or angry behavior
- Antisocial, destructive attitude
- Depressed or suicidal tendencies
- Attention seeking activities
- Delinquent behavior – especially in adolescents

### Signs of Possible Neglect

- Abandonment by parent or caregiver
- Unattended medical needs
- Consistent lack of supervision
- Consistent hunger, inappropriate dress, poor hygiene
- Lice, distended stomach
- Poor social skills
- Indiscriminate about his/her affection
- Pale, listless, begs or steals food, frequent absences from school
- Falls asleep in class, regularly displays fatigue
- Self-destructive behaviors



## Identifying Child Abuse and Neglect

Abuse is rarely one isolated incident. Often, there is a pattern of behavior that emerges over a period of time. Children often have difficulty talking about the abuse. This leads to many children “acting out” as a way of expressing their hurt or anger.

It is important to remember that even if you see signs, they do not necessarily mean that a child has been abused. The signs will vary according to the type of abuse, its intensity, and the developmental age of the child.

Some children who are abused display no signs. For this reason, it is important to listen carefully to any child who tells you about an act of abuse.

Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina works collaboratively with the North Carolina Division of Social Services to provide a variety of publications and more in-depth training about child abuse and neglect, abuse prevention, and parenting. If you would like additional information, please contact: Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina at 919-829-8009 or 1-800-CHILDREN. For additional information about Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina, please visit our website at [www.preventchildabusenc.org](http://www.preventchildabusenc.org).

## Referring a Family to the Department of Social Services

If you suspect child abuse or neglect, you can refer the family by calling, writing, or visiting your county Department of Social Services – Child Protective Services Unit. County contact information can be found at [www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/local/](http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/local/). You can also call the CARE LINE at 1-800-662-7030 to speak with a counselor who can refer you to the appropriate contact. A social worker at the local Child Protective Services Unit will listen to you and take down all the information you give. It is helpful if you can share the following:

- The name, age, and address of the child
- The name and address of the child’s parent, guardian, or caretaker
- The child’s condition, including the nature and extent of the injury or abuse
- Any information regarding the presence of weapons in the home, alcohol/drug abuse, or other factors affecting a social worker’s safety
- Where the child is located at the time the referral is made

### Important

- You do not need to prove that abuse has taken place; you only need reasonable grounds for suspicion.
- You do not need permission from parents or caregivers to make a referral. In fact, you do not even need to inform them you are making a referral.
- You do not need permission from your workplace to make a referral; although, there may be workplace guidelines to help you in making a referral, ultimately you are responsible for making sure the referral has been made.
- If you make a referral in good faith, you will receive immunity from possible civil or criminal liability that may result from your referral. Furthermore, the Department of Social Services is required to keep your identity confidential.

## What Happens After a Referral Has Been Made?

After you have discussed your concerns with a social worker at Child Protective Services, a determination is made as to whether or not the Department of Social Services will complete an assessment.

If intervention is warranted, Child Protective Services may use either an investigative approach or a family assessment approach to determine future actions and supports needed for the child and family. The Department of Social Services is required to initiate an assessment within 24 hours for abuse and within 72 hours for neglect.

The assessment may include a visit to the child's home and school along with interviews of those who are in regular contact with the child. The safety of the child is the top priority at all times.

North Carolina's Multiple Response System (MRS) is our state's on-going effort to reform the entire continuum of child welfare services in order to make child welfare more family centered and to keep children safe. MRS begins with the first referral of concerns about a child and his/ her family and continues all the way through finding a permanent home for those children who enter foster care. As a reform effort, MRS is not one single program. Rather, MRS is comprised of seven separate strategies delivered to families through a practice model grounded in the use of family-centered practice and system of care principles.

If a referral is not accepted for assessment and you still have concerns, you may request a review of the agency's decision by contacting the agency. If the decision is made by the Department of Social Services not to file a petition and you do not agree, you can request a review by the District Attorney.

### Why refer a family instead of report?

The word report is often associated with intentional error or wrong doing. A key reason for the Department of Social Services' implementation of the MRS system was to take a more family centered and strength-based approach to working with families. We all want children to grow up in safe, nurturing environments and we want families to have the skills and resources they need to provide such care. When you make a report to the Department of Social Services for suspected abuse or neglect, you are actually referring a family for services that will help strengthen the family unit as a whole.

### Help can be provided to the family through:

- Counseling
- Referrals to other agencies
- Intensive in-home services provided by trained volunteers or professionals
- Help with housing, finances, medical needs, and child care
- Development of a Child and Family Team, meant to build a support network for the family
- Emergency foster care services



## What To Do When a Child Discloses Abuse

When a child tells you that he/she has been abused, the child may feel scared, guilty, ashamed, angry, and powerless. You may feel a sense of outrage, disgust, sadness, anger, and disbelief. However, it is important that you remain calm and in control of your feelings in order to reassure the child that something is going to be done to keep him/her safe.

### You can show your care and concern by:

- Listening carefully to what the child is saying
- Telling the child you believe him/her
- Telling the child the abuse was not his/her fault
- Letting the child know you will share this information with someone who can help them

### You will not be helping the child if you:

- Make promises you cannot keep, such as promising that you will not tell anyone
- Push the child into giving details of the abuse – your role is to listen to what the child wants to tell you
- Ask leading questions to the child – this could be harmful to the assessment
- Discuss what the child has told you with others who are not directly involved with helping the child

## The Law

North Carolina statutes define an abused child as: any juvenile less than 18 years of age whose parent, guardian, custodian, or caretaker inflicts or allows serious physical injury by other than accidental means, or creates or allows to be created serious risk of injury, cruel or grossly inappropriate behavior modifications, or sexual abuse.

North Carolina statutes define a neglected child as: any juvenile who does not receive proper care, supervision, or discipline from the juvenile's parent,

guardian, or caretaker; or who has been abandoned, or not provided necessary medical care, or who lives in an environment injurious to the juvenile's welfare, or who has been placed for care of adoption in violation of the law. In determining whether a juvenile is neglected, it is relevant whether that juvenile lives in a home where another juvenile has died because of abuse or neglect or lives in a home where another juvenile has been subjected to sexual abuse or severe physical abuse by an adult who regularly lives in the home.

Any person or institution who has cause to suspect that any juvenile is abused or neglected, or has died as the result of maltreatment, shall report the case of that juvenile to the director of the Department of Social Services in the county where the juvenile resides or is found.

## Why Make a Referral

Because child abuse rarely stops without intervention and help, it is the law that every citizen respond to suspected abuse and neglect. By making a referral, you are helping the family get the services and help that they need.

Failure to contact Child Protective Services about suspected cases of child abuse leads to continuing abuse. Abused children carry the trauma associated with abuse throughout their lives. These childhood experiences can result in higher risk of alcoholism, pulmonary disease, depression, illicit drug use, liver disease, sexually transmitted diseases, smoking, and suicide attempts. A higher number of adverse experiences leads to an even higher risk for these poor health outcomes.

You can help stop the cycle of abuse by notifying your county Department of Social Services - Child Protective Services Unit when you suspect that a child is being abused or neglected.