

PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM ABUSE: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS, TEACHERS AND CHURCH LEADERS

Responsible persons seeking to protect children from abuse will:

Acknowledge Abusive Behavior

Child abuse refers to an act committed by a parent, caregiver or person in a position of trust (even though he/she may not care for the child on a daily basis) which is not accidental and which harms or threatens to harm a child's physical or mental health or a child's welfare.

There are four basic types of child abuse:

Physical abuse occurs when an adult injures a child physically and it is not an accident. It includes behaviors such as:

- Assault
- Shaking or slapping
- Burning or scalding
- Kicking
- Strangling

Neglect is any maltreatment or negligence that harms a child's health, welfare or safety. It can include physical, emotional, or educational neglect through such actions as:

- Abandonment
- Refusal to seek treatment for illness
- Inadequate supervision
- Health hazards in the home
- Ignoring the child's need for contact, affirmation and intellectual stimulation
- Providing inadequate emotional nurturance
- Refusal to ensure a child's education

Emotional abuse deeply affects a child's self-esteem by submitting him/her to verbal assault or emotional cruelty. It does not always involve injuries one can see. It can include situations such as:

- Close confinement, such as being shut in a closet
- Inadequate nurturance
- Extreme discipline
- Knowingly permitting such behavior as drug or alcohol abuse
- Ridiculing

Sexual abuse involves sexual contact between a child or teenager and an adult or significantly older, more powerful person. Children are not developmentally capable of understanding or resisting sexual contact and may be psychologically and socially dependent upon the offender. Sexual abuse encompasses all inappropriate fondling and touching, including behaviors such as incest, molestation, rape, oral-genital contact, and fondling of breasts and genitals. In addition to sexual contact, abuse can include other exploitive behaviors such as inappropriate verbal stimulation of a child or teenager, taking sexually explicit photographs of a child or teenager or showing such pictures to them, or exposing a child or teenager to pornography or adult sexual activity.

Use Appropriate Opportunities to Teach Children

- No one has the right to touch the private parts of their bodies or make them feel uncomfortable by what they say about their bodies or anyone else's. Children have the right to say a loud, emphatic "NO" even to relatives and close friends who do this.
- Adults should not ask children to keep secrets about things they do together. If someone asks a

child to keep this kind of secret, they should tell their parent(s), teacher or another adult right away. At least one-half of all child sexual abuse occurs within the family.

- They are not to allow anyone to take pictures of them partially or completely undressed. If anyone suggests doing this or shows them pictures of other children doing this, they are to report the incident to their parent(s), teacher or another adult at once.

- Children should report to their parent(s), teacher or another adult if someone makes silly remarks about sex, shows dirty pictures, or makes lewd gestures (or any gestures they don't understand).

- Children should also make such a report if someone offers to give them gifts or money.

- They should never answer the door when they are home alone.

- They should never tell anyone calling on the phone that they are home alone. Nor should they answer any questions.

- They are never to go into anyone's home or car without previous verbal permission from a parent. It is not appropriate or safe for parents to convey such permission through another adult.

- They are not responsible for helping strange adults look for an address, a pet, etc. It isn't appropriate for adults to come to children for such help.

- Children should know how to use the telephone in an emergency. They should know their own telephone number and how to use emergency numbers. They should be taught how to reach an operator on a public telephone even if they have no coins.

- The three "Safety and Survival" rules for the prevention of abuse which all children should know are:

Say "NO"!

Get away fast!

Tell someone!

Recognize the Possible Indicators of Child Abuse

The possible indicators of abuse listed below do not necessarily constitute proof that a child is being abused or neglected. They should serve as warning signs to look further and seek assistance in determining whether or not a child needs help. Trust your instincts if you think a family or individual is in trouble. Some possible indicators are:

Child Indicators

- Self-destructive and other destructive behavior
- Fractures, lacerations, bruises that cannot be explained or explanations which are improbable given a child's developmental stage
- Depression, passivity
- Hyperactive/disruptive behavior
- Sexualized behavior or precocious knowledge of explicit sexual behavior, pseudo-maturity
- Running away, promiscuous behavior
- Alcohol or drug abuse, other self-destructive behavior, e.g. eating disorders
- Social isolation of child and family
- Unrealistic parental expectations

Parent Indicators

- Parents whose anger at their children appears out of proportion with the child's behavior
- Parents with negative attitudes toward themselves or their children
- Parents who are defensive about their own harsh upbringing

Listen and Believe a Child

Children rarely make up stories about abuse. They simply do not have the vocabulary or the

experience to make up such tales. A child's report of behavior that makes them uncomfortable is always worthy of careful attention.

Respond to Suspected Abuse

- Take whatever steps are necessary to protect the child from further abuse. A report to appropriate authorities is an important step in assuring this protection.
- Stop the offender's abuse. Contacting law enforcement is a helpful step in holding abusers accountable and stopping abuse.
- Connect the family with available professional and support services.
- Rebuild family relationships where repentance and changed behavior open the way for forgiveness and reconciliation.
- Help the family mourn the loss of important relationships when reconciliation is not possible.

Involve Professionals Who Can Help

In many parts of the world, persons in the helping professions—pastors, teachers, doctors, counselors, police officers, social workers, health professionals—are legally mandated to report a suspicion of child abuse or neglect to child abuse authorities. The abusive behavior of offenders usually escalates over time if it is not stopped. Involving a wide circle of helping professionals when dealing with a suspected case of child abuse results in the most effective intervention for the abuser, in addition to helping the victim. Repentance, conversion, prayer and spiritual counsel can help the abuser, but professional intervention is most effective in holding the perpetrator accountable for his/her actions and stopping the abuse.

Prepared by Department of Family Ministries, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904 USA, 6/00.

© Portions are copyrighted by the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, 936 North 34th St., Suite 200, Seattle, Washington. Permission to reprint for use in congregational settings is granted. For information about videos and books on domestic violence and child abuse, contact the Center at (206) 634-1903.