

WHAT TO DO IF A CHILD TELLS YOU ABOUT ABUSE OR NEGLECT:

1. Listen to what the child is telling you. Do not infer or assume anything. Do not push the child to share more than he/she is willing. The child needs warmth and acceptance, not curiosity or interrogation. It is not necessary for the child to reveal specific or intimate details right away.
2. Reassure the child that he/she has done the right thing by telling you. Acknowledge the difficulty of this decision and the personal strength necessary to make this choice. Make it clear that the abuse or neglect is not the child's fault, that he/she is not bad or to blame.
3. Keep your own feelings under control. Be calm and non-judgmental. Do not express emotions such as shock, embarrassment, anger, or disgust. Do not criticize or belittle the child's family.
4. Use the child's own vocabulary. The child may relate the abuse or neglect to you using family terminology. Do not try to substitute more polite or correct words.
5. Do not promise not to tell. Know your limits. This is not a situation you can handle by yourself.
6. Tell the truth. Don't make promises you can't keep, particularly relating to secrecy, court involvement, placement, and caseworker decisions.
7. Be specific. Let the child know exactly what is going to happen. Tell the child you are going to report the abuse or neglect to the police or the Division of Family Service. Be honest; it does not protect the child to hide anything. For example, if the child discloses sexual abuse, explain that the child or the abusing adult/parent may be removed from the home. Help by preparing the child for what lies ahead.
8. Assess the child's immediate safety. Is it safe for the child to return home? Is he/she in immediate physical danger?
9. Try to help the child regain control. Let the child choose whether to accompany you when the report is made, who else to talk to, etc. Although many of the decisions may seem trivial, they will allow the child some sense of self-determination.
10. Offer positive reinforcement to the child for telling about the abuse. This may include telling the child that you are proud of him/her for telling and that he/she did the right thing by telling.
11. Reinforce to the child that the abuse was not his/her fault. Many children blame themselves for the abuse and need to hear that they were in no way responsible or to blame for being abused.
12. Tell the child that you will seek help for him/her so that the abuse stops and so that he/she is safe.
13. Report the abuse.
 - a. Children's Justice Center (sexual abuse only) 370-8554
 - b. Local Police
 - c. Division of Child and Family Services, Daytime 374-7005, after-hours-376-8261.

**UNDER UTAH LAW, EVERYONE HAS A LEGAL OBLIGATION TO
REPORT SUSPICION OR KNOWLEDGE OF CHLD ABUSE!!!!**

PREVENTION OF CHILD ABUSE

Whenever child abuse takes place there are three components present:

$$\text{CHILD} + \text{CARE GIVER} + \text{STRESS} = \text{CHILD ABUSE}$$

(Place transparency on the overhead projector.)

Everyone is a potential child abuser. There are countless accounts of average, everyday people who have found themselves out of control and have become abusive. To be certain, there are those who are chronic criminal child abusers. There are those who are well-meaning care givers who get frustrated to the point that they are no longer in control and they end up abusing the child. Today's lesson is focused on average people like you and me. How do we maintain control and prevent abuse?

The first thing we will look at this **stress**. Everyone has a different point at which they lose control. This is what we call **coping threshold** or your ability to deal with stress on any given day.

Remember the day we played the tape of the crying baby? Each of you became frustrated at a different point and time. Some days you maybe more easily angered than others.

Some days it seems all has gone well. You got your car fixed and it only cost half as much as you thought it would or your girl or boy friend asked you to the upcoming dance and you got 98% on your chemistry exam. It is easy to be patient and pleasant. Your **coping threshold** is relatively wide and you are not easily angered.

Some days it seems all has gone wrong. You wrecked your car, you had a fight with your boy or girl friend because he/she is taking someone else to the upcoming dance, and you failed your chemistry exam. It is not so easy to be patient and your temper is undoubtedly going to be hotter than usual. Your **coping threshold** is relatively narrow and you are easily angered.

The following are stressors that trigger child abuse. Remember that these are not the only things that can trigger and otherwise loving parent into being an aggressive abusive one.

The presence of any of these stressors can trigger child abuse; however, just because one of these stressors is present, does not mean that the child will be abused.

STRESSORS ASSOCIATED WITH THE CHILD

An unwanted child

A child that is different (different from other children, from other children in the family, from the parent, etc.)

Handicapped (child requires more time and patience, the parent may not be able to leave the child alone, the prospect of having to be a parent for the rest of one's life.)

A crying, irritable child

A hyperactive child

A child that reminds the parent or someone they do not like (an ex-spouse, the child's other parent, etc.)

A low birth-weight child (it is more difficult to bond normally to the baby when it has to stay in the hospital for a prolonged period of time.

STRESSORS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PARENT:

Abused as a child (25-35% abuse their own children, compared to 5% of parents who were not abused as children – this is the biggest factor relating parents to child abuse.)

Single parent (any parent can become overly stressed with parenting - being able to turn the situation over to the other parent can literally be a lifesaver).

Spouse is gone much of the time (has the same effect as a single parent).

Divorce (the stress of the divorce alone, single parenting, children who look like the other parent).

Alcohol or other drugs.

Low self-esteem (parent does not feel capable of parenting).

Isolation (lives away from family, neighbors, or friends who could provide help with frustrations and some of the responsibilities).

Husband uninvolved and critical (always telling the mother to “shut those kids up”).

Emotional immaturity

Postpartum depression

Unrealistic expectations (do not realize that a child cannot be toilet trained by 12 months, that children are normally messy, that two year-olds say “no” just because they are two year-olds).

Stress of unemployment (when unemployment rates go up, child abuse rates also go up).

Financial stress (25% of those with insufficient incomes abuse their children in some way 48% are neglectful).

Other stresses of any kind.

Mental illness (while many think this must surely be the case of people who would abuse children, this category accounts for 10-25% of child abuse).

Often we can remove the **stress** form the equation with some thought and some effort:

1. A parent might get a sitter or ask assistance from friends or relatives if he/she is a single parent or has a spouse that is gone much of the time. This will alleviate the stress of being the only one to care for the child and allow some time to relax and restore enough energy to deal with a child. An option available in most communities is the family support center.
2. Take child development classes or read books on the subject to help understand the normal development of a child and what can be expected at each stage.
3. Find a job or sell some assets to alleviate financial stressor the stress of unemployment.
4. If the parent was an abused child, seek help and make specific plans as to how he/she will parent without the use of abusive action.

ABUSED PARENTS CAN BECOME NON-ABUSIVE PARENTS IF:

1. They had one loving and supportive parent or foster parent.
2. They have a positive relationship with their spouse.
3. They have fewer stressful life events.
4. They are aware that their childhood treatment was abusive, resolve no to repeat it, and actively pursue alternative non-abusive child guidance methods.

It is almost a guarantee that every one of you who become parents will come to a point in your parenting where you will have the urge in some way to abuse your child. While this may seem impossible to you now, every parent meets their **coping threshold** form time to time. If we look at the abuse equation, we can discover how to prevent abuse in our own homes.

1. Remove the stress.

In the story of the spilled milk we could remove the stress by removing the glass of milk or by putting the milk in a spill-proof child's cup (now widely used by parents with less stress). The mother could have removed the glass from the reach of the child and assisted the child with drinking from the large unmanageable glass.

2. Remove the caregiver or the child.

If a parent feels that he/she has reached his/her coping threshold he/she might get someone else to watch the child for a period of time until he/she can cool off and regain control, thus removing the caregiver and the child from a situation that could become violent or abusive.

It is not always possible to get someone to come to your home and give you a rest when a child gets unbearable. It is always wise to have a plan of action for such times. The following example may be helpful. After checking the child to see that he/she is dry and not in pain or discomfort for some reason, put the child in a crib or playpen, being sure the child cannot get out and that there is nothing he/she can hurt him/herself with. Then leave the room or even go outside for a brief period of time to allow yourself to cool down and regain control of your own emotions. If necessary, check back on the child and then leave again until you feel calm and able to deal with the child. Remember, children cannot really hurt themselves by just crying and sometimes they have pent-up emotions that need to be released just as adults do. Crying may be their way of relieving these emotions.

If a sitter is the caregiver, it is wise for a parent to make certain the sitter has options if the child becomes too much for him/her. Make sure there is a number where you can be reached or a number where the sitter can reach a grand parent if the stress level gets too high. For assistance, refer the sitter to a neighbor that you have made arrangement with to help in times of need. The parent(s) should call home from time to time, especially if he/she will be gone for long, and see how things are at home. It is relatively easy to detect the stress in the voice of a sitter if things are getting unbearable. Remember that it is especially unnerving to listen to a young child cry for extended periods of time and sitter should not be left to deal with that type of situation.