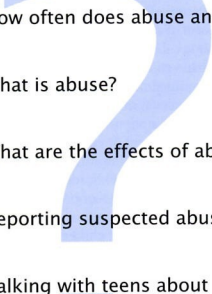


Abuse and Neglect of Children and Adolescents

Guidelines for understanding abuse and neglect when working with youth and their families

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- How often does abuse and neglect occur?
 - What is abuse?
 - What are the effects of abuse?
 - Reporting suspected abuse or neglect?
 - Talking with teens about abuse?

Institute on Human Development and Disability

Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research, and Service
A Unit of the College of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Georgia

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How often does abuse and neglect occur?

The abuse and neglect of children and adolescents became recognized as a significant social problem in the United States in the 1960s. Since that time, the number of confirmed incidents of maltreatment has increased dramatically, due mainly to greater social awareness and more effective investigation and prosecution. In Georgia, a total of 34,079 incidents of child abuse and neglect were confirmed by the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) in the year 2000 (Protective Services Data System, 2000, Georgia Department of Human Resources). Thirty-four percent of these incidents involved children ages 10-18. Children and teens with disabilities are at increased risk.

What is abuse?

Definitions of maltreatment may vary from state to state, but are usually very similar. The following definitions are those listed in the Georgia Code.

Neglect is when “a parent or caretaker, either deliberately or by chronic disregard, permits a child to suffer and/or fails to provide one or more of the elements necessary for the child’s physical, intellectual, social and emotional development” (Georgia Department of Human Resources). Neglect is the most common form of maltreatment because most cases of physical or sexual abuse also involve some type of neglect. The most common form of neglect is inadequate supervision. Other types of neglect include inadequate food/clothing, emotional neglect, inadequate health/medical care, abandonment/rejection, and educational/cognitive neglect.

Physical abuse is “injury to a child under the age of 18 by other than accidental means by a parent or caretaker which results in bruises, welts, fractures, burns, cuts, internal injuries, etc.” Inappropriate discipline is the most common type of physical abuse and accounts for 86% of the substantiated physical abuse incidents (Georgia Department of Human Resources, 2000).

Sexual abuse is “A form of child maltreatment in which contacts or interactions occur between a child under 18 and a parent or caretaker, during which the child is being used for the sexual stimulation of that adult or other person.” The most common type of sexual abuse is fondling. Other types include penetration, sodomy, exhibitionism/voyerism, sexual exploitation, and genital injury.

What are the effects of abuse?

The effects of matreatment vary greatly between individuals. Some of the factors that may determine the consequences of abuse include the relationship of the victim to the abuser, the age the matreatment begins, how long the maltreatment continues, and the respose by others to the abuse. The good news is that, with appropriate intervention and support, most victims of abuse and neglect can mature into healthy and happy adults.

Reporting Suspected Abuse or Neglect

Who must report? According to Georgia Code, most people providing services to children and families **must** report to the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) when they have “reasonable cause to believe” child abuse has occurred. In Georgia, mandated reporters include teachers, therapists and counselors, health care providers, child care providers, and personnel from any youth service-related organization - anyone paid to provide some form of service to children or families. Other non-paid or non-professional people are encouraged, but not required, to report.

It is important to understand that, as a mandated reporter, you are not required to *prove* that maltreatment has occurred. Any indicators that cause you to *suspect* that abuse or neglect have occurred must be reported. According to the Georgia Code, anyone who has “reasonable cause to believe” that maltreatment may have occurred is protected from legal liability, even if the abuse is not substantiated. However, mandated reporters who fail to report suspected maltreatment can be criminally prosecuted for this failure. All mandated reporters should be familiar with the signs of maltreatment.

How and when do I report? Oral reports must be made immediately and directly by the individual who first suspects that maltreatment may have occurred. Most schools, agencies, and organizations have their own internal reporting protocol. Everyone should know the procedure outlined by their place of employment. Most often, supervisors should be notified first and should work with the person who suspects maltreatment to make the report to DFCS. It is important to realize, however, that reporting to a supervisor within the school or organization does not satisfy the legal requirement until the report is received by DFCS.

Oral reports can be made immediately by calling the county DFCS office or 911. Oral reports should be followed by written reports. Contents of the reports should include as much of the following information as possible:

- Name, sex, age, address of child, current location
- Descriptions of injuries or conditions
- When signs were noticed, any change in frequency of indicators
- Family information
- Information about possible perpetrators, if any are suspected
- Name, contact information for person reporting

How do I talk to a teen about possible abuse?

It is not your responsibility to confirm that abuse has occurred or to conduct a formal interview of a youth you think may have been abused. It may sometimes be necessary, however, to ask questions to determine if maltreatment may have occurred, or to respond in a supportive way to a youth who tells you of abuse. In talking to teens about abuse, we should:

- Be supportive and calm, taking care not to show our own shock, fear, or embarrassment.
- Try to protect youth from public disclosures. When possible, have conversations in private.

- Reassure the youth that it is not his or her fault.
 - Never ask questions such as, “Why didn’t you tell me?” or “Are you sure that happened?”
 - Stay close to the youth immediately after disclosure to give him or her a sense of security
 - Never promise to keep the abuse a secret. Inform the youth that it may be necessary to tell others in order to keep the youth safe.
 - As soon as possible, write down what you both said, in as much detail as possible, noting the exact words used.
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