

## **Protecting Children from Child Abuse and Maltreatment: Domestic Violence**

Being a mandated reporter of child abuse and maltreatment and making a report to the State Central Register is hard, but it's the law. When you call the Child Abuse Hotline you are calling because you have "a reasonable cause to suspect" child abuse or maltreatment. You make that decision based on indicators. These indicators can come from the child's physical appearance, the child's behavior or from the parent's behavior. Sometimes you may decide you have reasonable cause to suspect a child is being abused or maltreated based only on a physical indicator from a child, such as a hand shaped bruise on a child's arm. More often you come to your reasonable cause to suspect because of all three indicators.

### ***Domestic violence, child abuse and neglect***

One of the legal responsibilities you have as a licensed or registered child care provider in New York State is making sure that children "receive instruction, consistent with their age, needs and circumstances in techniques and procedures which will enable them to protect themselves from abuse and maltreatment" (New York State Office of Children and Family Services Child Day Care Regulations Section 414.7(b), 416.7 (b), 417.7(b), 418.7(b)). In order to be in compliance with this regulation it's important to keep your knowledge of child development, child abuse and maltreatment up to date. You need to know about resilience, or the ability to bounce back from trouble, as well as about protective and risk factors.

One risk factor is domestic violence. There is growing evidence that where there is domestic violence, child abuse or maltreatment also occur. There is a 30% to 60% chance if domestic violence is happening in the family that child abuse or neglect is happening as well, or if child abuse or neglect is occurring, domestic violence is also happening. (<http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/otherpubs/harmsway.cfm>). Children in families where domestic violence occurs can be abused or neglected by the violent abuser or by the victim.

### ***What is child abuse and neglect?***

#### **Child abuse**

Child abuse happens when a child's parent or other person legally responsible for his/her care causes serious physical injury, creates a substantial risk of serious physical injury, or sexually abuses him or her. It's important to know that the person who actually abuses a child is not the only person who is considered an abuser. A person can also be guilty of child abuse if they allow someone else to do those things to a child. So, if a father shakes a baby violently to stop its crying, he is guilty of abuse, but so is the mother who allowed the abuse to occur. (<http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/prevention/critical.asp>)

#### **Child neglect (maltreatment)**

Child neglect is one form of maltreatment. A child is neglected when his or her parent or other person legally responsible for his or her care does not provide the minimum degree of care when it comes to providing food, clothing, shelter, education or medical care when financially able to do so. Abandoning a child or not providing adequate supervision are also signs of neglect. If the

use of drugs or alcohol interferes with a parent's ability to adequately supervise a child, this is also considered neglect. (<http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/prevention/critical.asp>)

Child abuse and neglect can both come into play when a child is exposed to domestic violence.

### ***When domestic violence results in neglect or abuse by the victim***

Women who are the victims of domestic violence may use forms of maltreatment as a way to protect their children. Remember, some children use aggressive or challenging behavior to get their needs met—even if the *behavior* is unacceptable but the *reason for it* isn't. Women who are victims of domestic violence may neglect their children so that they can keep the violent abuser calm and control the level of violence. Women who are battered may not pay attention to their children because they are afraid that if they do, the abuser may become more violent toward her. ([www.nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/otherpubs/harmsway.cfm](http://www.nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/otherpubs/harmsway.cfm).) Women who are victims of domestic violence may use too much or inappropriate discipline with their children. They may do this because they want to keep their child's behavior under control so the abuser will leave the child alone. Sometimes women who are victims of domestic violence abuse their children because they are angry at the abuser (Straus & Gelles, 1990)(Walker, 1984).

### **Child's behavioral indicators of neglect**

Children who have been neglected show certain physical signs or behavioral indicators. The children may be suffering from failure to thrive, a developmental delay or listlessness (Sykes & Symons-Moulton, 1990). Children may beg for or steal food. You may also see children eating inappropriate objects. Their attendance in your program may not be very consistent and they may have a very hard time getting along with their peers.

### **Adult behavioral indicators of abuse and maltreatment**

You may see a mother of a child in your care using harsh discipline or being overly controlling. This could be because she wants to keep her child's behavior under control so that they won't become the focus of the abuser.

### **When children observe domestic violence.**

Children who have witnessed domestic violence in their homes can experience certain consequences. Infants, toddlers, preschoolers and school-agers up to age five who live in violent homes can suffer from sleep disturbances, bed wetting, separation anxiety or failure to thrive. Older school-age children in your care who have witnessed violence may have eating disturbances, or use seductive or manipulative behavior. They may be afraid that they will be abandoned or lose control (Sinclair, 1985). Children who come from violent homes tend to be more aggressive than children who don't. Children who are suffering from the effects of living in violence, especially when both the abuser and the victim are well known and emotionally important to the child will use their behavior to communicate this to you when they come to you for care (Osofsky, 1996). If you observe these behaviors you'll need to be ready to take action. It's part of your legal promise to reduce risk and prevent harm to the children in your care.

Children who are exposed to violence in their homes are learning how to treat others. (<http://www.calib.com/nccanch>) They are learning about the value of men and women and the influence of power (<http://www.calib.com/nccanch>). The abuser and the victim are powerful role models for children who witness domestic violence. According to social cognitive learning theory children learn new behaviors by copying models. Children pay attention to models they think are good at what they do. They also pay attention to models they think of as important and powerful. Girls tend to pay attention to girls and boys tend to pay attention to boys. Children also pay attention to models that are rewarded with social status. Some things that children who have observed domestic violence are learning include that it's okay to physically hurt someone. They also learn that you solve problems by hurting others. They are learning that the way to get attention is to make someone mad. They are learning that either men or women, depending on who are the abusers and who are the victims, are not as valued as the other. They learn that the person with the most physical power wins.

Children will act on and act out this view of the world in your program. If the aggressive and inappropriate behavior that results isn't addressed and replaced by more positive and healthy role models, these behaviors and ideas will be reinforced every time they witness an episode of violence in their home, on TV, between their friends or a random act of violence. Without some planned or accidental intervention, it's likely that children who come from violent families will end up being a perpetrator of violence or it's victim.

This long term consequence is a powerful reason for you to help children who you suspect are being exposed to violence in their homes.

## References

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