

## **Preventing Child Abuse and Maltreatment**

According to New York State Office of Children and Family Services Child Day Care Regulations, (NYOCFS) “Children must receive instruction, consistent with their age, needs and circumstances, in techniques and procedures which will enable them to protect themselves from abuse and maltreatment.” (NYS OCFS Child Day Care Regulations 416.7(b), 417.7(b), 418.7(b) & 414.7(b)). Upon reading this regulation, your first reaction may be, “That’s not my responsibility; that’s the families’ responsibility.” Another response may be, “How do I teach the two-year-olds in my program how to protect themselves from child abuse? They’re too young to understand what child abuse is.” Perhaps you’re thinking, “I don’t want to scare the children.” “They’re going to think everyone is bad if I teach them about child abuse.” or, “NO WAY are families going to stand for this.”

The bottom line is this: you still have to comply with this regulation. You have to figure out how the children in your program are going to learn how to protect themselves from child abuse and maltreatment. Once you know more about what puts children at risk and what protects them, it may be easier than you think. In fact, you may even discover that you already do many of the things that build the resilience children need to protect them from harm.

### ***A legal promise - keeping children safe from harm***

When you become licensed or registered as a childcare provider in New York State, you’ve made a legal promise to reduce risk and prevent harm to the children in your care. Your signature on the completed application is a testament to this.

Keeping children safe from child abuse and maltreatment is part of that legal promise. One way that you already do this is calling the State Central Register for Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR) Hot Line if you have “reasonable cause to suspect” child abuse and maltreatment. By law you are a mandated reporter. This is a key role you play when you care for children. When you make a call to the SCR, it’s because you believe that a child has already been abused or maltreated. You call because you’re mandated by law to keep children safe from *further harm*. The NYOCFS regulation is all about *preventing* abuse or maltreatment *before it happens*.

### ***Child abuse, maltreatment and resiliency***

In order to do all that you can to prevent child abuse or maltreatment before it happens, it’s important to know what role the child, the family, the community and the society play in increasing or decreasing the risk of child abuse and maltreatment. Each of these roles has elements that could make a child more vulnerable to child abuse or maltreatment but may also protect them by building up a child’s resilience. Resilience is a child’s ability to encounter trouble and bounce back. Building and strengthening a child’s resiliency should be the foundation of any instruction designed to teach children to protect themselves from child abuse and neglect.

## **Risk factors**

### Child risk factors

Children don't cause abuse, but they may have characteristics that put them at risk for child abuse and maltreatment. Do you have children enrolled in your program who have a difficult temperament or are slow-to-warm up? Do any of the children in your care have a disability or a chronic or serious illness? Are any of the children enrolled in your program overly aggressive, have behavior problems or attention deficits? Does the child have a group of friends that are anti-social? What are the ages of the children in your care? How many of them are there? (<http://www.nccanch.ach.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/emerging/repor/index.cfm>).

### Family risk factors

Families also have a role to play in whether or not children are likely to be abused or maltreated. How well do you know the families of the children in your care? Are the parents, guardians, or adults who have primary care responsibility for children experiencing high levels of stress in their lives? Do they have unrealistic expectations about how children should behave? Do they have misinformation about how children grow and develop? Do the single-parent families in your program have a support network; relatives or friends that they can call if they need help? One place to check is the "blue card." Who do they list as emergency contacts? Who has permission to pick up the child when they can't? Are there parents who are very young, separated or divorced? Are their families enrolled in your program who have many children? Pay attention to the interactions between the adults and the children of the families enrolled in your program. Are the interactions inappropriate? Cold? Harsh? These are all family factors that can make children vulnerable to child abuse (<http://www.nccanch.ach.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/emerging/repor/index.cfm>)

### Community and environmental risk factors

What risk factors exist in your community that may also be making children vulnerable to child abuse? Are there families in your program that live in poverty and don't have access to medical care, health insurance, or social services? Are the child's parents or guardians unemployed or do they move frequently? Are there families who rely on you for child care who live in dangerous or violent neighborhoods? Has the family been a victim of racism or discrimination? Are the schools in the community below standard? Are there environmental toxins in the area, such as lead or toxic waste from manufacturing plants? Is the family homeless? These are all community and environmental factors that make children vulnerable to child abuse and maltreatment (<http://www.nccanch.ach.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/emerging/repor/index.cfm>).

## ***What you can do about risk factors***

If any of the children in your care have experienced or are currently experienced any of these risk factors, they are more likely to be vulnerable to child abuse and maltreatment. These children need your very special attention. You will need to do everything you can to shore them up and make them resilient to harm.

**Know the risk factors.** These risk factors make children vulnerable to abuse. If you have children in your program that have a slow-to-warm-up or difficult temperament, let parents and guardians know that these are normal ways for children to behave. Be ready to share strategies

with parents on how they can meet their needs and have positive relationships with their children. If you have a child in your program with a disability, chronic or serious illness, be sensitive to the stress that this causes the family. Be ready to share information about resources in the community that can support this family. Be a listener and reflect back to parents and guardians their feelings of frustration, sadness or joy they experience about their children.

**Regularly observe the behaviors of the children in your care.** If you have children who use aggressive or challenging behaviors to get their needs met or can't seem to pay attention, be prepared to refer the family to your region's Early Childhood Direction Center (ECDC) or the school district's Council on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) to make sure they get the services and support they need.

**Give your families a heads up about what they can expect from their children as they grow and develop.** Use your knowledge of child development and talk with parents and guardians about the "typical" behavior they can expect from their child based on his or her age and stage of development. This will help families have appropriate expectations and give you a great opportunity to share with them discipline strategies that will help them manage their children's behavior and foster positive social and emotional development.

**Model warm and positive interactions with children when parents and guardians are in your presence.** If you hear a parent or guardian tell their child that he or she is bad or stupid or if you hear a parent being mean, cold or harsh. Get involved. Take a risk, for the child. Take the adult aside when the time is appropriate and talk with them about what you witnessed and how it makes you feel. Empathize with the adult, i.e. "I know just how you feel. I get frustrated when my two-year-old stamps his foot and tells me no, he's not going! When I'm really tired, I feel like I could hit the roof." Next, interpret the child's behavior based on his development. "But, then I take a deep breathe and remember that he's two and he's trying to get some control over his own life." Finally, offer an appropriate strategy. "When he's like that I figure out two choices I can live with tell him what they are. That way he feels like he has some control and I get him to do what I want him to do. So if I want him to leave, I'll say to him, Alex, you can walk to the car or I can carry you. He's been away from you all day. He really misses you. Running away from you when you want him to get ready to leave may be his way to tell you he's mad. Let me help". Don't let a parent or guardian leave your program at the end of the day with an expectation about their child's behavior that could result in harm to the child.

## ***Protective factors***

Just as there are risk factors that make children more vulnerable to child abuse and maltreatment, there is also child, family and community protective factors that can strengthen resiliency and help protect children from child abuse and maltreatment.

### Child protective factors

There are factors that children possess that can reduce the risk of child abuse and maltreatment and foster resilience. These factors include:

- Good health, history of adequate development
- Above-average intelligence

- Personality factors: easy temperament, positive disposition, internal locus of control, active coping style
- Balance between help seeking and independence
- Hobbies and interests
- Good peer relationships
- Positive self-esteem
- Good social skills(<http://www.nccanch.ach.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/emerging/repor/index.cfm>)

There are some factors on this list that you can use to foster the resilience that will protect children from child abuse and maltreatment.

You can be in an active partnership with parents to ensure that the children who are in your care are in good health. One way to do this is by maintaining the appropriate medical forms and medical information. This includes tracking immunizations and notifying families in a timely manner when new medical information or immunization information is due. It also includes paying attention to the special comments that are written by the child's health care provider on the medical form, or comments written by the families on the "blue cards." You can also accomplish this when you conduct a daily health check and use the gathered information to make decisions about whether a child is too sick to stay in care, or if you have reasonable cause to suspect child abuse or maltreatment. You are also helping to maintain a child's good health when you've gone through the steps you need to have a health care consultant on site who to administer medication.

When you model and teach children social skills that they can use to develop friendships and live cooperatively with others you are supporting another protective factor... This happens when you let children know that it's okay to express all their emotions and when you help them to name their emotions. When you actively teach children how to solve problems cooperatively and non-violently, you are teaching social skills that will serve children throughout their lifetime. When you don't allow aggressive behavior such as hitting, pushing or kicking, and when you help children find more appropriate ways to express their anger and frustration, or to get their needs met, you are bolstering social skills and giving children the tools they need to develop the friendships that are critical to a child's school success.

As you develop warm and positive relationships with each child in your care you are fostering resiliency in each child because she has adults in her life that can be trusted to meet her needs. When you give children specific feedback about what they do well and what they get right, and let them know when they are not getting it right, you show and tell them how to develop a positive sense of self and they will begin to develop competence in all that they do. When you develop warm give and take, reciprocal relationships with the children that you enroll in your program, you are showing them that they are worth knowing, and this fosters their self-esteem.

#### Family protective factors

There are characteristics in families that will help protect children from child abuse and maltreatment. Family protective factors include:

- Secure attachment and a positive and warm parent-child relationship.

- Supportive family environment
  - Household rules/structure; parental monitoring of child
  - Extended family support and involvement, including caregiving help
  - Stable relationship with parents
  - Parents who have a model of competence and good coping skills
  - Family expectations of pro-social behavior
  - High parental education
- (<http://www.nccanch.ach.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/emerging/repor/index.cfm>)

Families are not the only places that children can experience the positive effects of the protective factors above. You can provide children with many of these things and in some cases you probably already do!

First, you are helping to protect children from child abuse and maltreatment when you develop a warm, positive and responsive relationship with each child in your care. Secure attachments are the foundation for every aspect of a child's growth and development. They are also vitally important in building and strengthening a child's resilience.

Second, you are part of the child's extended family. Your families rely on you to provide loving care for their child everyday. They rely on you when times are tough. You may be the one person and have the one place that remains a constant for them and their children during a chaotic period in their lives.

Third, you can model positive and useful social coping skills for all the families in your program everyday. Make sure you meet and greet each family at the beginning and end of each day. Share some specific observations about each child. Be sure to ask families if there is anything that you need to know about their child that may be different or unusual. It's important for you to know how a child slept or ate the night before, or if there have been any changes in the family. Ask each parent or guardian if they have something wonderful or special to share about their child. Encourage them to tell you about the interesting or funny things their child has done. Ask parents to tell you about their child's successes. Not only does this show children that there is a connection between you and his or her family but like healthy, extended families, you share the good and the not so good.

#### Social/Environmental Protective Factors

There are social/environmental factors that can help to protect children from child abuse and maltreatment.

- Mid to high social economic status
  - Access to health care and social services
  - Consistent parental employment
  - Adequate housing
  - Family religious/faith participation
  - Good schools
  - Supportive adults outside of family who serve as role models/mentors to child.
- (<http://www.nccanch.ach.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/emerging/repor/index.cfm>)

Like the child and family protective factors, there are things that will be difficult to change. But also like the child and family protective factors, there is a lot that you can do or may already do.

You can be a resource to your families. You can make sure that you provide parents with information and resources about health care and social services that may be available to them. Post phone numbers of individuals or agencies that can give your parents and guardians information about affordable health care, social services, jobs, and housing information that can help them meet the demands of being a parent today. You can put together a resource guide with all types of resources in your community and distribute it to all the families in your program; then leave extra copies where parents can pick them up as they need them. Both of these strategies provide help without singling out any particular family. Also, be sure to update the information you post or publish on a regular basis.

Get to know the schools in your neighborhood that the children in your program attend. Find out what families and children think about them. Find out the names of the teacher's the children in your program have so you can talk with children about their experiences.

Each of these steps helps to build resilience in children and strengthens the family unit so if the child is abused or maltreated, the child and the family will become more flexible and better able to bounce back from adversity.

### ***As children grow.***

Knowing more about risk and protective factors of child abuse and maltreatment helps you identify the things that you can do everyday that will build and strengthen a child's resilience; his ability to face trouble and bounce back. This is the foundation of teaching children how to protect themselves against child abuse and maltreatment. However, as children grow older and their intellectual and language abilities mature, you'll want to teach children more directly about how to avoid actual situations that could result in child abuse and maltreatment. These strategies include teaching about "stranger danger" and "good touch, bad touch." as well as lots of written and verbal communication with families regulations, what your plans are and how you would like your families to be involved in helping to protect their child. But we'll save that for another day.

## References

New York State Office of Children and Family Services Child Day Care Regulations 414.4(b), 416.4(b), 417.4(b) and 418.4(b)

Risk and Protective Factors of Child Abuse and Neglect.(2003) An excerpt from *Emerging Practices in the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect*, US. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, Office on Child Abuse and Neglect. Retrieved on March 25, 2004 from the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information website.

<http://www.nccanch.ach.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/emerging/repor/index.cfm>