

How To Prevent Child Abuse

By Carl Fisher

Those two words, “child abuse,” cause just about everyone’s stomach to flip-flop and heart to sink, and bring to mind the horror stories on the nightly news of children beaten, starved and abandoned by parents whose actions seem monstrous and impossible to understand. Yet child abuse begins somewhere, and the second most shocking thing in those news reports usually seems to be that no one had any idea that it was occurring. Here are some things you need to know to help prevent child abuse. Remember, there are many different ways of harming a child beyond physically hurting them. Both neglect and psychological and emotional abuse are just as much of a problem and often more difficult to recognize and address.

- 1) It has become a cliché that abused children become abusive parents. If you have been a victim of childhood abuse or, frankly, if you have serious concerns about how you were treated as a child or you have difficulty managing your anger or violent behavior, seek help. Do not let shame or the fear of being judged stand in your way. Talk to your doctor, a qualified therapist or psychiatrist, your pastor or even a trusted friend about your concerns. Or call the National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-4ACHILD.
- 2) Create a community of concern around your children. Often child abuse is triggered by stressful situations within the family, from relationship problems between parents to financial troubles to additional burdens such as caring for a new sibling or other family member. Caring for the children means caring for the parents as well, so keep your eyes open for families having problems, especially if you think you, your church, your community group or even simply a collection of friends and neighbors, can help.
- 3) Know, and don’t ignore the signs and symptoms. Though we all know about things like unexplained and ongoing injuries – anything from bruises to burns to broken bones – keep an eye out for less obvious behavioral symptoms. Depression, excessive aggression, fear of adults or of a particular family member, inappropriate clothing for the weather, extreme hunger or filthy appearance may not be signs of abuse, but they are among the warning signs of abuse and neglect recognized by ChildHelp USA. If you see signs of abuse, don’t keep quiet. Discuss what you should do with a professional. Again, the National Child Abuse Hotline offers support if you suspect a child is being abused or neglected.
- 4) As a community, adopt a policy of zero tolerance for child abuse and neglect and communicate that policy in a positive way, through education and support. Just like Neighborhood Watch and other programs designed to protect your community and assist professionals in their work, parents and children should be educated about child abuse, its signs and symptoms, and where help can be found.
- 5) Knowing that there is calm, rational and informed assistance available is key to the prevention of child abuse whether you have concerns about yourself or others. Though different families have different philosophies of parenting, and though times have changed regarding corporal punishment, it is never acceptable to harm a child in any way. In other words, while a light swat on the fanny may fall within

- community standards of acceptability, an ongoing pattern of physical punishment involving pain and/or physical, mental or emotional injury to the child certainly does not.
- 6) Recognize emotional and psychological abuse. No one teaches you how to be a parent, and this can be a large part of the problem. Promote good parenting practices through classes at your local school or hospital, and support and participate in community, church and business projects and programs that help make sure that children and their parents are fed, clothed and have adequate medical and psychological care.
 - 7) The key to preventing child abuse is ensuring that everyone involved from children to parents to neighbors knows there is a place to call or a place to go for help. Don't assume that "everyone knows" or that someone else will communicate the information. Make sure that information on child abuse is available where you work, where you shop, at school, at church, anywhere where those suffering from abuse might see a lifeline.

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