



To guide you through the system ...

A handbook for caregivers of abused children



**CHILDREN'S
ADVOCACY
CENTERS**
OF NORTH DAKOTA

Contact names and number

Children's Advocacy Center _____

Coordinator/Interviewer _____

Social Worker _____

Investigator _____

State's Attorney's Office _____

Therapist _____

Family/Child Advocate _____

Medical Provider _____

Other _____



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Welcome

Welcome to the Children's Advocacy Center. We are here to offer support to you and your child. The CAC is guided by the The Child First Doctrine.

Your child is our first priority.

Your child is here because of concerns about possible abuse. Our goals are to:

Do the best job possible in finding out what happened.

Work in cooperation with other services/ programs to help your child and you.

GOALS

Help make the process as comfortable as possible for you.

Help your family begin to heal.

This book was provided for you by the Children's Advocacy Centers of N.D. We hope this handbook will help you understand more about child abuse, and the process we use to respond to a report of abuse.

Working through the experience of child abuse is difficult for both children and their caregivers. We are here to help. Please call us if you have any questions.



What is abuse?

Physical Abuse



Physical abuse of a child is when an adult causes non-accidental injury or harm to a child.

28.3% of adults report being physically abused as a child.

Sexual Abuse



Sexual abuse occurs when an adult uses a child for sexual purposes or involves a child in sexual acts. It also includes when a child who is older or more powerful uses another child for sexual gratification.

20.7% of adults report being sexually abused as a child.

Psychological Maltreatment



Psychological Maltreatment is when a caregiver harms a child's mental or social development, or causes severe emotional harm. While a single incident may be abuse, most often emotional abuse is a pattern of behavior that causes damage over time.

10.6 % of adults report being emotionally abused as a child.

Neglect



Neglect is when a caregiver does not give the care, supervision, affection and support needed for a child's health, safety and well-being.

Adapted from ChildHelp.org



You are not alone

When abuse is reported, caregivers sometimes feel as if they are on a roller coaster of emotions. This is normal and it is important to take care of you and your child's emotional needs now. The report can affect your life in many ways, and it takes time to adjust. Following are some of the common thoughts and feelings caregivers have. You may feel one or more of these, or you may move from one to another.

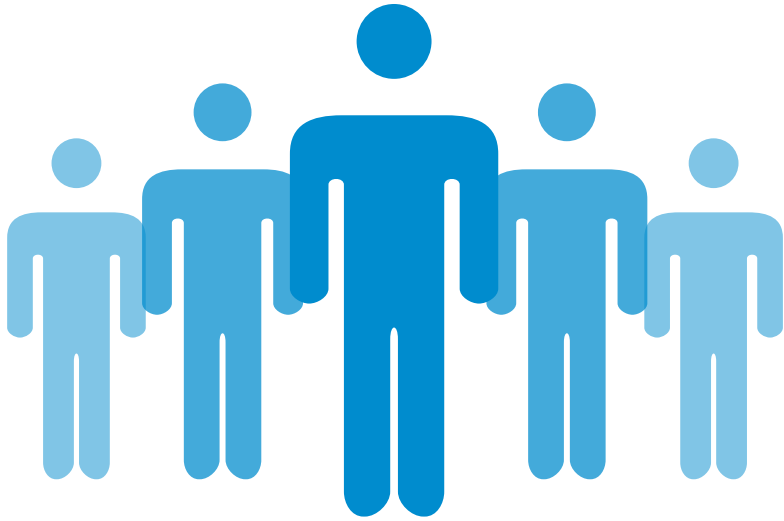
Denial. Your first reaction may be to not believe or accept the possibility that it really happened. Caregivers often experience denial because it is too overwhelming to accept that the abuse occurred, and that there will be after-effects. It may take time to overcome denial and face the realities of abuse.

Anger. You may feel angry with the offender for what he or she has done. At times, you may feel angry with yourself for not protecting the child. You may even feel angry with the child. Be honest about your feelings and share them with a trusted person or group.

Helplessness. You probably do not know what to expect and feel that things are out of your control. You may feel invisible and think there is nothing you can do to help the situation get better. Some caregivers may fear that their children will be taken away. Remember that there are a team of people to help you through this. Ask as many questions as you need.

Shock, numbness or repulsion. You may feel shock, numbness and repulsion for the new situation you find yourself in. If so, you may need to seek counseling to help you through this difficult time.





Hurt and betrayal. It is normal to feel hurt. It may take time. You may have lost a spouse or partner if that person was the offender. You may have lost friends and other loved ones. It is very important to take time to grieve for these losses.

Concern about money. You may be worried about finances because of lost income. There are programs that may be able to help you.

Fear of violence or retaliation. In homes where violence is common, you may fear the offender will try to harm you or your children. If so, contact the local domestic violence center for help.

Guilt and self-blame. The offender is the only one responsible for the abuse. The best thing you can do now is support your child and learn all you can about how to make things better. Reading this handbook is a good first step.



How to help your child

Abuse can be overwhelming to children. Most children are taught to trust adults. An overwhelming majority of abuse occurs by someone known and trusted by the child and family. They tend to believe what adults tell them is true rather than rely on their own feelings. If the offender tells them that what is being done is okay, they may doubt their own feelings that it is not. If the non-offending caregiver's initial reaction when they hear the child's abuse report is "This can't be true," the child may wonder if his or her own feelings are mistaken. Children rarely lie about being abused, more often, they fear that telling will make people angry with them. It is extremely difficult for children to report abuse.

Adapted from: When Your Child Has Been Molested by Kathryn B. Hagan

The single most important factor affecting the child's recovery is the level of support from the non-offending caregiver.

It is important to provide your child with safety, love and support. Let him or her know it is okay to cry or be angry. It is important for your child to know that the abuse was not their fault. Some children are concerned about how the disclosure will affect their family and loved ones, so it is important to be supportive.



Disclosure can be overwhelming and scary for children, so it is best not to ask a lot of questions. Let your child know that if they need to talk, that you will be there to listen and answer any of their questions.

The chances of recovery for your child are much greater if you do all you can to support them. If you feel torn between loyalty to your child and loyalty to the offender, find a professional to help you sort out those feelings.

Some things you can say that will help your child:

- I believe you.
- It's not your fault.
- I'm glad you told me.
- I'm sorry this happened to you.
- I will take care of you.
- Nothing about YOU made this happen.
- I am upset, but not with you.
- I'm sad too. You may see me cry. That's all right. I will be able to take care of you. You don't need to take care of me.
- You can still love someone but hate what they did to you.
- I am proud of you.



Some things you can do

- Return to a normal routine as soon as possible. Children often find comfort in the predictability that a routine offers.
- Ensure that your child is assessed and receives appropriate counseling services.
- Find help for yourself. You don't have to do it all on your own.
- Teach your child the rules of personal safety. Tell them what to do if someone tries to touch them or treat them in an uncomfortable or hurtful way.
- Be careful not to question your child about the abuse. If your child wants to talk about it, listen supportively, but do not probe. Specially trained professionals at the CAC will interview your child to obtain the necessary information without harming the case or further traumatizing him/her.
- Keep yourself and your child away from the person suspected of the abuse. This is to protect your child's welfare, yourself and that person.
- Avoid discussing the case with other victims or the families.
- Never coach or advise your child on how to act or what to say to professionals or investigators.
- Your child may need an extra sense of physical security. Stay close, and assure your child you will keep him/her safe.
- Remember to give attention to your other children.
- Follow the recommendations from your team at the CAC. They are specially trained in working with abuse and will be able to offer recommendations specific to your family and case.

The parent is the child's best advocate, so do not hesitate to ask questions of your team.



Taking care of yourself

This can be a very difficult time, and you may feel pressured from many directions. Although you are trying to take care of a lot of other people, you also need to take care of yourself.

Your well being is very important, so you need to find time to do something just for you and plan to do it regularly.

Scheduling your own time and space will help you gain or regain a sense of your own identity. Take the time to nurture yourself. Here is a plan that may work for you.

Step 1

Schedule your self-care (exact time, date and place) on your calendar.

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Step 2

Decide what you'll do.

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Step 3

Tell anyone who needs to know that you will be gone for the time you've set. Explain that this is your personal time and that you'll be back later.

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Step 5

Enjoy yourself! Some suggested activities: take a walk; have lunch with a friend; go to the movies; go out to dinner; join an exercise class; take a drive; and last but not least, equally important, join a support group.

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Step 4

Take care of details, such as finding childcare, arranging transportation, etc.



Your team of professionals

At the CAC we work with a multidisciplinary team of professionals, which meets regularly to respond to child abuse reports. The roles of the team members are described below.

Forensic interviewer: Talks to your child in a developmentally sensitive and child friendly manner about the concerns.

CPS worker: Works with law enforcement to determine what happened to make sure your child is safe. He/She can also assist you with referrals for services.

Law enforcement: Investigates the concerns and gathers evidence to decide if any laws have been broken and if/what criminal charges may be filed.

State's Attorney: Reviews and decides whether the offender is charged and prosecute the case.

Victim advocate: Works closely with the team and is a safe and supportive person who can assist you with questions and concerns you have. He/She can also assist you with referrals for services.

Counselor: Provides specialized therapy services for children and family members impacted by abuse and suffering from trauma symptoms. These services are important to help your family heal.

Medical provider: Provides medical exams and gathers forensic evidence. These evaluations are conducted by specially trained medical professionals.



The interview

The forensic interview is a structured conversation with a child that is geared to each child's age and developmental level. It is a process that allows the child to tell their account of the allegations of abuse.

Caregivers are not allowed to watch the interview process as we are taking an official statement and it is important to keep the child focused. Children will react to subtle cues from caregivers such as them turning away or crying at hearing what has happened to the child. In your presence, your child may be unwilling to tell important details because he/she wants to spare you from hearing them. Sometimes caregivers find it hard to control their emotions regarding what they hear. A child may feel pressure to tell the story in a way that can complicate the legal process.



What happens next

There are many pieces of the investigation of abuse, therefore there may not be an easy answer about what happens next. This is something you can discuss with your advocate, who can help find out more information about your case, when new information is available. Some things to keep in mind:

- You will receive follow up contacts from your advocate to see how you are doing.
- The offender may not be arrested right away, if at all.
- The recording of your child's interview is sent with the investigating officer as evidence and will be kept confidential and secure.
- Sometimes after a forensic interview a child may remember or decide to tell you more about what happened to them. If this happens it is important to contact Law Enforcement and/or social services right away.

Some things you can say to your child if the alleged offender is not held legally accountable.

- “Just because they didn’t charge or find _____ guilty, that doesn’t mean they didn’t believe you.”
- “You may be wondering how someone can do something wrong or against the law and not be punished. It doesn’t make sense to me, either.”
- “It doesn’t matter what the court process did. What matters is that you did what you needed to—you told.”
- “You have been very brave. You are safe. I am proud of you.”



Signs sometimes shown by abused children

Physical

- Sudden weight change
- Abdominal pain
- Vomiting
- Vaginal infections
- Changes in eating

Behavioral

- Sleep disturbances
- Nightmares
- Compulsive masturbation
- Inappropriate Sex Play
- Behavior consistent with an earlier age
- Detachment from others
- Insecurity

Emotional

- Mood swings
- Flashbacks

Difficulty in school

- Inability to concentrate
- Drop in grades
- Change in relationships

Anger/Hostility

- Aggressiveness
- Acting-out behavior
- Self-abuse
- Withdrawn/isolated

Depression

- Low energy
- Irritable
- Low or no interest in previous activities

Specially trained trauma-focused mental health services are available to help children overcome the effects of trauma. The presence of these symptoms does not always mean that your child has been abused. Since children do not possess adult language skills they tend to “tell” how they feel through action and behavior.



The therapy process

Many children and their caregivers need counseling and support to reduce the emotional impact of abuse. Therapy is a safe place for people to express themselves to help them heal.

Therapy benefits children and their families in many ways. When a child and family experience abuse, it can be an emotional and confusing time. A specialized trauma-focused child therapist can apply special training in child abuse and/or trauma to help work through thoughts and feelings. It will help the child restore his/her emotional health and provide tools for the family to recover as quickly as possible.

Therapy is available to all CAC clients who have experienced trauma and abuse. You can request therapy by visiting with CAC staff.



What to say to others

One challenge your family will face will be what to say to others, if anything, about the abuse. Keep in mind that this is highly personal information and your decision should be based on who can support you through this and help provide safety for your child. Your child may feel embarrassed and/or responsible; it is important for them to know that this isn't a dirty little secret. You and your child can decide together if you will tell anyone.



It is important to keep in mind how others might react. Their reactions may include disbelief, distress, concern, embarrassment, disgust, disinterest or unnecessary questioning for intimate details. If you know they will react in a negative way, you may not want to share the information with them unless it becomes necessary. It is important to maintain your child's sense of privacy. Remember, you don't owe anyone an explanation. "I'd rather not talk about it" is an acceptable response. Or simply say, "It's been a very difficult time for all of us." "I appreciate your concern." Or it may be easier to just nod as an acknowledgment of what someone says.

Reference: *Your Child Has Been Molested*, by Kathryn B. Hagans & Joyce Case



Prevention

Abuse affects many children. While there is no one thing we can do to guarantee that our children will be safe from abuse, there are things we can do to decrease the likelihood of abuse.

- **Learn the facts and understand the risks.** The experts estimate that one in 10 will experience abuse in their lifetime. It is also likely that they will be abused by someone they know and trust.
- **Talk about it.** Teach children proper terms for all body parts and that their body belongs to them. Tell them that no one should touch them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable, not even people they trust and love. Children often keep abuse a secret, but barriers can be broken down by talking openly about it.
- **React Responsibly.** If a child discloses abuse, stay calm, believe the child, and thank them for telling you. Encourage them to talk without asking leading questions about details. Get professional help from social services, law enforcement or your local CAC. You may be faced with a situation where you suspect abuse but don't have any proof. Suspicions are scary, but trust your instincts. Have the courage to report.

Adapted from Darkness to Light



Notes and questions



Dakota Children's Advocacy Center

1303 E Central Ave
Bismarck, ND 58501

128 1st St. W #2
Dickinson, ND 58601

(701) 323-5626
www.dakotacac.org

Northern Plains Children's Advocacy Center

20 1st St SW #202
Minot, ND 58701

Outreach services provided at various locations in
Belcourt, ND and Williston, ND.

(701) 852-0836
www.northernplainscac.org

Red River Children's Advocacy Center

100 S 4th St #302
Fargo, ND 58103

261 Belmont Drive
Grand Forks, ND 58203

(701) 234-4580
www.rrcac.org

For more information:
www.cacnd.org

