

HANDOUT #2: ABUSE REPORTS AND FALSE ALLEGATIONS: HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND TO RESPOND TO THEM

The majority of allegations of abuse or neglect by a parent who is fostering or adopting are unfounded. However, cases of abuse and neglect have occurred in foster and adoptive homes. Every state requires that allegations of child abuse or neglect be investigated. As stressful as an investigation can be, it is important to remember that parents who foster or adopt and persons who work in child welfare are all in this together to protect children. We owe it to children to investigate every allegation. As a result, this means that some parents who foster or adopt will have an allegation made against them.

When kinship caregivers and parents who foster or adopt find themselves accused of abuse or neglect, they often feel scared, hurt, angry or confused. They may worry that these allegations will jeopardize their ability to continue to parent their children or that their jobs will be jeopardized. Depending on who they believe made the allegation, the relationship with their child welfare agency, school personnel, relatives or neighbors can become strained.

Allegations of abuse or neglect cannot be prevented. However, understanding why they occur, how you can protect yourself and how to respond will help you navigate what can be an unnerving experience.

Why False Allegations Occur

Allegations of abuse or neglect may be made for many reasons. For example, blurring of the timeline of events and perpetrators, coupled with the child's age and the trauma of abuse, results in confusion about these past events. A child's comment to a therapist, teacher, friend or neighbor about prior abuse may be misunderstood; this can result in a report of abuse or neglect that names the parent who is fostering or adopting as the alleged perpetrator. In other cases, a child or youth may believe that an allegation against a parent who is fostering or adopting will hasten return to their family. The child's family may make an allegation out of anger or jealousy or based on something they heard from their child that made them concerned. A child also may make an allegation out of anger toward the parent who is fostering or adopting or as a way potentially to change the child's placement.

How to Protect Yourself

When presented with the possibility of taking a child into your home, ask questions about the child's history and placement needs. Some child welfare agencies provide written documentation of the child's history that includes the reason for removal as well as records of abuse, placement, medical and behavioral history. If this documentation is not provided to you, carefully document the information

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you receive from the agency staff about the child. In some situations you will be able to talk to the child's previous caregiver to gain some additional information. It is important to be honest with the agency and yourself about your capacity to meet the specific needs of each child to be placed in your care. It is also important to know your limits about the number of children you are able to parent effectively at one time.

In addition to being prepared before a child moves into your home, there are some practices you can put in place after a child is living in your home:

- Carefully supervise the child you are fostering or adopting during the child's first few weeks in your home. Ideally, let the child have a bedroom of one's own, though this is not always possible.
- Ensure that each sexually reactive or sexually aggressive child has one's own bedroom. Review the NTDC handout #3 *House Rules for Sexual Safety*.
- Have a conversation with the children in your home about appropriate and inappropriate touching and other behaviors. Establish boundaries about privacy and touching, and make sure that all family members know them.
- Keep a journal for each child. Document any troubling physical, emotional or behavioral issues about the child and any warning signs that you observe. If you are worried about a behavior, convey that to your caseworker.
- Record the date and time of any injuries that the child receives, no matter how small. Check with your caseworker about taking pictures of injuries when you become aware of them.
- Keep notes of your conversations with caseworkers, therapists, teachers and any other professionals. Record the date and time of each contact as well as the information discussed.
- Request copies of incident reports from the child's day-care facility or school.
- Unlike physical abuse and neglect, a child's history of sexual abuse may not be known until the child feels safe enough to disclose it or until the child starts to demonstrate sexual awareness or behaviors inappropriate for the child's age or developmental stage. Become familiar with the signs of child sexual abuse:
 - heightened sexual awareness,
 - mimicking sexual acts,
 - sexualized play and
 - attempts to engage adults or other children in sexualized behavior.
- Document all medical appointments, physical and medical reports, medications prescribed and instructions provided by medical professionals as well as by caregivers from previous placements.
- Never use or threaten to use physical punishment.

How to Respond to an Allegation of Abuse or Neglect

Child welfare agencies are required to investigate allegations of abuse or neglect. The investigator's job is to gather enough information to determine whether the reported abuse actually occurred. This could include interviews with the child, household members, other adults involved with the child and, possibly, medical personnel.

An investigation may take months to conclude. Here are suggestions to guide you through the process:

- Become familiar with your agency's procedure regarding child abuse investigations in a foster home or a home where the family has been approved to adopt a child. Ask when you would be notified of an allegation and whether you would be able to have a support person present with you if an investigation occurs.
- Once you become aware of the allegation, do **not** question the child.
- Allow the caseworker investigating the allegation access to your home.
- Set aside your feelings of shock and, possibly, anger. Respond to the investigator's questions calmly and respectfully.
- Understand clearly the specific allegation of abuse or neglect being investigated.
- Show the caseworker records you have that document any injuries or troubling behaviors.
- Answer questions honestly and factually. Refer to records you have been keeping to refresh your memory. If you can't recall something, just say so.
- The investigator might ask if there are others who may have information about the incident in question. Don't be embarrassed or feel the need to hide the investigation from family or friends. Readily provide names and contact information. This can help the investigator to make a decision more quickly about the validity of the allegation. The investigator may want to talk with the child alone.
- Seek the support of your advocate or local association for parents who are fostering or adopting.
- If you believe that you are not being heard during an investigation, ask to speak with a supervisor or a manager. A supervisor may be able to explain the situation better or to identify and address a miscommunication about the situation.
- Here's what to do when the investigation is concluded:
 - Request the agency's determination about the validity of the allegation -- in writing. You might be able to request the full report.
 - Work with the caseworker to develop a plan for you to follow with the child.
 - Ensure that you are not taking out your frustration on the child who was the subject of the investigation. You may need to seek help from a professional to repair the relationship.

We all know that parenting a child with a history of loss and trauma can be challenging. Although have an allegation of abuse or neglect brought against you can be a difficult process, it potentially can lead to a better understanding of the child and the child's needs.

References

United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families; Children's Bureau. (2018). *Child Welfare Outcomes 2018: Report to Congress*. Retrieved May 14, 2022, from [Child Welfare Outcomes 2018: Report to Congress | The Administration for Children and Families \(hhs.gov\)](#)

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