

# Reporting Child Abuse & Neglect in Alaska

## **Remember...**

The Indicators listed below do not necessarily mean child abuse or neglect is going on in a family. If you have cause to suspect abuse or neglect, however, a sensitivity to these indicators can provide useful information.

Included on this page is a list of those who are required by law to report known or suspected child abuse and neglect. Others in the general public are also encouraged to report such knowledge or suspicions so that children can be protected and families can receive help.

*We are all responsible for the welfare of the children in our communities. You are encouraged to report instances of known and suspected child abuse and neglect.*

In response to the crucial need for intervention in child abuse and neglect cases, Alaska, like all other states, **requires by law\*** that certain groups of people formally report confirmed and suspected child abuse and neglect. Groups who must report include individuals who are most likely to be in contact with children under the age of 18, and who, therefore, are most likely to see and hear important clues about instances of abuse and neglect.

## **Who are mandated reporters?**

The following persons who, in the performance of their professional duties, have **reasonable cause to suspect\*\*** that a child has suffered harm as a result of abuse or neglect, must **immediately**(as soon as reasonably possible-no later than 24 hours) report that information to the nearest office of the state's Department of Health & Social Services, Office of Children's Services:

- **Practitioners of the healing arts**, including chiropractors, mental health counselors, social workers, dentists, dental hygienists, health aides, nurses, nurse practitioners, certified nurse aides, occupational therapists, occupational therapy assistants, optometrists, osteopaths, naturopaths, physical therapists, physical therapy assistants, physicians, physician assistants, psychiatrists, psychologists, psychological associates, audiologists, speech-language pathologists, hearing aid dealers, marital and family therapists, religious healing practitioners, acupuncturists, and surgeons;
- **Administrative officers of institutions**, including public and private hospitals or other facilities for medical diagnosis, treatment or care;
- **Paid employees of domestic violence and sexual assault prevention programs**, and crisis intervention and prevention programs;
- **Paid employees of an organization that provides counseling or treatment** to individuals seeking to control their use of drugs or alcohol;
- **School teachers and school administrative staff** members (public and private schools);
- **Peace officers and officers of the state Department of Corrections;**
- **Child care providers, including foster parents, day care providers and paid staff.**

The law encourages the persons named above to also report cases that come to their attention in their nonprofessional capacities. **Further, the law encourages any person to report instances of known or suspected abuse and neglect.**

## **What are child abuse & neglect?**

STATE LAW DEFINES child abuse or neglect to include the following actions by those responsible for a child's welfare:

- **Physical injury** that harms or threatens a child's health or welfare;
- **Failure to care for a child**, including neglect of the necessary physical (food, shelter, clothing, and medical attention), emotional, mental and social needs;
- **Sexual abuse**, including molestation or incest;
- **Sexual exploitation**, including permitting or encouraging prostitution;
- **Mental injury**--An injury to the emotional well-being, or intellectual or psychological capacity of a child, as evidenced by an observable and substantial impairment in the child's ability to function in a developmentally appropriate manner; *or*
- **Maltreatment**--A child has suffered substantial harm as a result of child abuse or neglect due to an act or omission not necessarily committed by the child's parent, custodian or guardian.

### **Who are the abused children?**

ESTIMATES INDICATE that over two million children are abused or neglected each year in this country alone. In 1989, at least 1,200 and perhaps as many as 5,000 children died as a result of child abuse or neglect, and over 160,000 were seriously harmed.<sup>[1]</sup> Professionals estimated that one out of every four girls and one out of ten boys will be sexually abused before they reach 18.<sup>[2]</sup>

### **Any child can be the victim of abuse or neglect, including:**

- Children of all ages, from infancy through the late teens;
- Children from families of all income levels;
- Children of all cultural and social backgrounds.

### **Who are the abusers?**

- ANYONE can be a child abuser:
- People in all walks of life;
- People in all income brackets;
- People of all cultural and social backgrounds.

### **ANYONE...**

CONTRARY to what people may think, a person who abuses a child is usually not someone with a severe psychiatric disorder. They may have emotional problems which increase their potential to abuse, but usually, they are indistinguishable from anyone else. In fact, in many instances, a person who abuses is a normal person whose stress levels have reached a crisis point.

Parents Anonymous, Inc., the self-help organization for abusing parents, has identified a number of characteristics of parents who may be at "high risk" to abuse. These indicators, especially when coupled with clues from a child's comments, behavior and/or appearance, can be very useful. Some of these indicators are:<sup>[3]</sup>

- Parents who do not seem sensitive to their child's basic needs for food, shelter or clothing;
- Parents who seem indifferent to, deny, are unaware of or seem annoyed by injury, illness or developmental delays in their children;
- Parents who seem preoccupied with the fear that their children will grow up to be delinquents unless they are severely punished in childhood;
- Parents who tell you how "nervous" their child makes them;
- Parents who scapegoat one child as being different or bad;
- Parents whose anger about their child's behavior seems to be out of proportion to the situation;
- Parents who are socially isolated and have little time away from their children;

- Parents whose expectations of their children or of themselves as parents are unrealistic;
- Parents who express fear that they may harm their child;
- Parents who are uncomfortable relating to their child in your presence;
- Parents whose self-esteem seems to be very low.

**There are some other family indicators that, if coupled with children's indicators, could signal sexual abuse or exploitation. Among those indicators are:[4]**

- Previous occurrence of child sexual abuse in the family;
- Other violence in the home;
- Excessive interest in daughter's activities with boyfriends and other peer relationships;
- Rigid role structure in family (paternal dominance/abused, passive mother);
- Marked role reversal between parent and child;
- Unusual amount of or inappropriate physical contacts between family members;
- Complaints about a seductive child.

#### **Children's indicators of abuse or neglect**

THE FOLLOWING are excerpts from a more detailed list of indicators compiled by the government of British Columbia, the Ministry of Education, Science & Technology.[5]

- Children who are frequently late or absent. The child may be neglected; parents may be having trouble coping; or the child may be expected to take on parental duties and may not be allowed to attend school on some days.
- Children who come to school early or who are reluctant to go home in the afternoon. May suggest a lack of caring at home; no one at home; fear of going home.
- A child who is inadequately dressed for the weather may be neglected.
- Children with welts, bruises and other physical injuries should be seen by a doctor or nurse, and the incident reported immediately if there is cause to suspect nonaccidental injury.
- Children who are hyperactive, destructive, and aggressive may be reflecting the violence at home. Children who act up may be asking for help.
- Children who are withdrawn, passive, overly compliant can be emotionally damaged. Many abused children feel very little emotion, having withdrawn to their own world.
- A child who has obvious medical needs that are unattended may well be physically neglected.
- Children who are undernourished and who go without breakfast and/or lunch can be suffering from neglect unrelated to poverty.
- Children who are tired, lethargic, listless may be suffering from neglect. Parents may not regulate their child's schedule, including sleep patterns.

**There are some additional children's indicators that have often been identified with child sexual abuse. Those include:[6]**

- Regression-- withdrawing into fantasy worlds, wanting to be someone else;

- Delinquency and aggression-- especially sexually acting out and abuse to others;
- Sexual promiscuity, prostitution and unusually seductive behavior;
- Poor self-image;
- Poor peer relationships;
- Sudden school problems;
- Depression;
- Sudden eating and/or sleeping problems;
- Excessive clinging and/or fear of going home or fear of a particular person;
- Unusual fears or phobias, especially of being left alone and of men/boys;
- Self-destructive behavior (drugs, alcohol, suicidal gestures);
- Excessive or unusual rubbing of genitals (their own or others');
- Familiarity with sexual terms and activity beyond the child's age and level of development;
- Excessive and/or inappropriate physical contact with other children or adults;
- Confiding in someone, but not telling the whole story ("We have a secret, but I can't tell" or "What if I want to tell you something but I can't?");
- Running away --Every child who runs away should be asked if they are being sexually abused.

### **What should I do if I know or suspect?**

IF YOU ARE AWARE of or have a reasonable suspicion of the existence of abuse or neglect, even if you are not a mandated reporter, you are urged to report that information to the nearest office of the Department of Health & Social Services, Office of Children's Services. At the very least, talk to someone you trust about the situation--a teacher, an elder, public health nurse, health aide or staff of a domestic violence shelter, for example. It is essential that you take some action to protect the child from further harm. A child's physical and emotional well-being, even that child's life, can be at stake.

**It is not your responsibility to determine whether your suspicions are correct, or to investigate those suspicions.\***

If you cannot contact the nearest office of the Office of Children's Services for any reason, and immediate action is necessary for the well-being of the child, make your report to a police agency. An officer will then take immediate action to protect the child and, at the earliest opportunity, will notify the nearest office of the Office of Children's Services.

There may be times when you wonder whether something constitutes abuse or neglect, or if your suspicions are adequate to warrant reporting. Please feel free to contact the Office of Children's Services office nearest you (addresses and phone numbers are in this brochure) to discuss those questions--anonymously if you prefer. Often such a discussion can make your next move --to report or not --much clearer.

### **How does the system work and what is my role?**

WHEN YOU REPORT, you can discuss with an Office of Children's Services social worker the advisability of telling the parents that you have reported. In some cases, telling them why you've reported may be helpful. As Parents Anonymous, Inc. points out, "as the reporting person, you are the first link in the chain of rehabilitation for the family. How you relate to the family can be the conditioning factor for how they perceive those who will follow in the helping process. Your attitude can make the difference between a family that expects and accepts help and one that is defensive and hostile. It helps to realize that abuse may be a plea on the part of the parent for help."[\[7\]](#)

There may be times, however, when you do not want the parents to know that you've reported. In such a case, let the agency to whom you report know that your name is not to be given to the parent in question. Or report anonymously. The important thing is to report. The Office of Children's Services may be unable to take appropriate action without your help, and you may be asked later if you are willing to relinquish anonymity.

The Office of Children's Services must, by law, investigate all reports of suspected child abuse or neglect. If the agency finds that the report is unfounded and the family is not in need of services, that will end the investigation. If, however, the social worker believes that the child is in need of protective services (and that the family is in need of services), a program of in-home support services can be determined to help stop the abuse or neglect, including protective day care, individual and family counseling, and homemaker support. If the social worker determines that the child is in need of emergency protection, the worker can immediately take custody of the child and remove the child to a place of safety. That is a temporary placement. Foster placement or permanent out-of-home placement and termination of parental rights can be done only through court action.

It is important to keep in mind that in most cases, such extreme actions are not required.

If you have reported abuse or neglect and want to know if action has been taken on the case, you can contact the Office of Children's Services for verification. Depending on your role with the family, the Office of Children's Services may only be able to give you very limited information. It is important to remember that information you have learned about a family or individual in the course of your duties relating to the reporting of known or suspected abuse is confidential and you may not disclose it to other parties.

### **What is my legal liability?**

ACCORDING TO STATE LAW, a person who, in good faith, makes a report, permits an interview under 47.17.027, or who participates in judicial proceedings related to reports submitted is immune from any civil or criminal liability which might otherwise be incurred or imposed.

A person required by law to file a report of abuse or neglect who willfully or knowingly fails or refuses to do so is guilty of a class B misdemeanor.

## **The Office of Children's Services is committed to keeping children safe *and* to keeping families together when that is possible...**

IT IS OFTEN POSSIBLE to work with the family to help them solve their problems. It isn't easy, but people can change.

If you know about or have a reasonable suspicion of child abuse or neglect, report it within 24 hours to the nearest office of the Office of Children's Services. Following are addresses and phone numbers for offices of the Office of Children's Services.

IF FOR ANY REASON you cannot reach the appropriate office to make a report, call 1-800-478-4444. Remember, if a child is in imminent danger and you are unable to reach the Office of Children's Services immediately, contact a local law enforcement agency.

### [Contact us by Region](#)

\* Alaska Statutes 47.17

\*\* "Reasonable cause to suspect" means cause, based on all the facts and circumstances known to the person, that would lead a reasonable person to believe that something might be the case.

<[1]< U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, "Child Abuse and Neglect: Critical First Steps in Response to a National Emergency," 1990.

<[2]< Sexual Assault Center, Harborview Medical Center, "Sexual Abuse of Children--The Offender," October 1980.

<[3]< Parents Anonymous, Inc., "Child Abuse is Scary," 1977.

[4] Adapted from Jane Ramon, M.S.W., "Indicators of Child Sexual Abuse," 1984.

[5] Province of British Columbia, "Child Abuse/Neglect Policy Handbook," 1979.

[6] Adapted from Jane Ramon, M.S.W., "Indicators of Child Sexual Abuse," 1984

<\*< "It is not the intent of the legislature that persons required to report suspected child abuse or neglect under this chapter investigate the suspected child abuse or neglect before they make the required report to the department." --Alaska Statutes 47.17.010.

<[7]< Parents Anonymous, Inc., "Child Abuse is Scary," 1977.

- **Office of Children's Services**
- HomeCurrently selected
- About OCS
- Employment Opportunities
- Contact Us
- **Programs**
- Adoption and Guardianship
- Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council
- Children's Justice Act
- Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Grant
- Early Intervention/Infant Learning Program
- Family Preservation
- Foster Care

- Independent Living
- Indian Child Welfare / Tribal Partnerships
- Strengthening Families Through Early Care & Education

- **Useful Links**

- Adam Walsh Checks - Central Registry
- Alaska Children's Trust
- Council on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault
- Employment
- Grants
- Grievance Procedure and Appeal Information
- Information for Parents
- Links
- Media
- Newsletter - Pipeline
- Publications
- Quality Improvement
- Report Child AbuseCurrently selected
- Safe Surrender of Infants Act
- Services We Provide
- Statistics