

What You Need to Know About Child Abuse

The television show "What would you do?" used hidden cameras to gauge reactions and test the character of witnesses.

The gist: when faced with an ethical dilemma, would you do the right thing?

Once, I felt like I was in that situation - only there were no hidden cameras or actors.

Near my house, a pre-teen was being dragged across the street kicking and screaming by a man who I presumed was her father. At first, I thought I should mind my business. Then, I became concerned for her and called out to ask if everything was alright. Two men nearby also stopped what they were doing to step in.

Intervening was a simple thing to do, but my heart was pounding. But it ended up being the right thing. And now, when I feel like I should do something, I do it without hesitation.

It may be simpler to spot abuse when it's physical, but it can be challenging to know what to do or say in any situation with suspected abuse or neglect. But it's each of our jobs to be an advocate for children in our community. Here are a few things that may help you identify and report suspected abuse.

What is child abuse?

As a caregiver, child abuse is the act (or failure to act) that endangers a child or causes injury or harm. This can lead to physical, emotional, mental and/or sexual impacts.

The law in each state defines child abuse differently, but all agree that child abuse includes:

- Physical, sexual or emotional abuse.
- Physical, medical or emotional neglect.



How to spot abuse

Sometimes, a child shows no indication of abuse at all. But other times, there are red flags:

- Change in behavior.
- Unexplained marks or bruises.
- Frequently absent from school.
- Lacking adult supervision.

There are times where the interactions between a parent and child can point to abuse or neglect. It's not uncommon to witness something questionable in a public place - like the grocery store parking lot (or even your front yard).

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What to do when you believe a child may be abused

When you suspect abuse or neglect, try not to jump to conclusions. It's not your job to interrogate, but it is important to ask questions and report suspected abuse. This is exactly how we keep kids safe.

Try one or more of the following.

1. **Speak up.** Don't be afraid to speak out if you believe something isn't right. By stepping in or making your presence known, you may stop abuse or prevent future harm. (This is exactly what happened to me.)
2. **Ask questions.** If you believe a child may be suffering abuse or neglect, it's okay to ask questions. By simply asking "What happened?" when you see an odd-shaped bruise, you are saying that you care and that the child can talk to you.
3. **Offer help.** There are times where you can intervene before abuse happens. If a caregiver is at her wit's ends, ask if you can help - this could diffuse tension and change the mood of those involved.
4. **Talk to a teacher or coach.** If you are concerned about jumping to conclusions, try discussing your thoughts with someone who knows the child.
5. **Call your state's child abuse hotline.** Reporting suspected abuse is not an accusation. It is instead a request that a professional look into the situation for the sake of the child and family. Calling the hotline in your state means that you care enough about a child to make sure he (or she) is safe.

State of Iowa Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-362-2178

State of Illinois Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-252-2873

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We can all agree that keeping kids safe should be a priority for the entire community. That's why it's important to understand how to identify and report child abuse and neglect.

Because the cameras may not be rolling, but the stakes are higher than those on any reality television show.



Originally posted on the Now What? Blog on 8/13/14. The Now What? Blog served for nearly 7 years to

1. *Normalize parents seeking support and help as a manner of child abuse prevention*
2. *Engage community in how they can work to prevent child abuse*
3. *Work to build resiliency in families through promotion of the 5 protective factors*

Maybe you coach a baseball team or you help care for the neighbor kids from time to time. You are investing in the safety and security of the children in our community. Because it truly does take a village to raise our children, we want to offer the tools needed to bring awareness and education to preventing child abuse.

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