



## **STEPS TO TAKE IF YOU THINK A CHILD IS BEING ABUSED**

*By Mary L. Pulido, Ph.D.*

### **Signs and Symptoms of Physical Abuse**

It's not always easy to tell if a child was hurt while playing or roughhousing, or if he was deliberately harmed by his caretakers. Here are some guidelines for telling the difference:

- Physical abuse often leaves bruises, particularly bruises in different stages of healing. As bruises change color when they heal, if you see a black and blue mark paired with a yellow or greenish mark on a child's skin, it may be cause for concern.
- Cuts, burn marks, grip marks on the arms or neck, and bruises in odd spots, such as the cheeks, neck or back, are also potential signs of abuse.
- Behavior can be an indicator too. A child who has been abused may act withdrawn, sad or anxious, or, conversely, angry and defiant.
- Any injury on an infant should warrant further inquiry; infants are completely dependent on their caretakers.

### **Signs and Symptoms of Sexual Abuse**

The signs of sexual abuse may be harder to detect. Sex abuse offenses range from fondling to intercourse, and include using a child for pornographic means. Often sexual abuse does not leave physical indications so concerned adults should be aware of behavioral indicators.

- Sexually abused children may exhibit sexual behavior that is much advanced for their current age.
- A child may exhibit regressive behaviors such as bed wetting or thumb sucking.
- The child may have bruises, or experience itching or bleeding in the genital area.
- The child may not want to be left alone with certain individuals whom they previously were not afraid of.

- The child may seem withdrawn and depressed.

If you observe any of these behaviors, gently explore your concerns. Often in sexual abuse cases the children have been told by the perpetrator to “keep it a secret” and may feel guilty or afraid to disclose the abuse. You need to let the child know that your role is to keep them safe and that they should not worry about telling you what happened. Child abuse is **NEVER** the child’s fault.

### **Steps to Take**

What are the steps in making a report? The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC) recommends that all parents and concerned adults learn the basic steps and take action when necessary.

- If you see a child being abused or hear a child screaming in pain, **call 911**. The police are trained to respond to these sensitive calls, and in doing so you may save a child’s life.
- Every state has a hotline number you can call to make a report if you suspect a child is at risk. **NY: (800)342-3720; NJ: (800)792-8610; CT: (800)842-2288.**

When you make a report, the police or the state hotline will request information on what you have suspicions about or witnessed. You should mention the age and whereabouts of the child, the person who is perpetrating the abuse and the nature of the child’s injuries. The official will ask for your name and number, but you can choose to remain anonymous. Even if you are not certain about all of the specifics, **MAKE THE CALL**. It’s then up to the investigators to follow a course of action.

Yes, taking action will probably make you anxious— that’s understandable as it is such an important undertaking. Yet, you will rest easier knowing that due to your intervention, the child and his or her parent(s) can get help and attention. Remember, child abuse is preventable. Everyone must be part of the solution; let the solution start with you.