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Child Neglect: It Can Happen In Your Own Backyard -- Recognize It and Take Action!

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Many children die each year from child neglect. The media normally reports on child abuse fatalities so child abuse is clearer in the public's mind. Child neglect is extremely dangerous too. Here is the difference between abuse and neglect. Child abuse occurs when a parent intentionally takes action to harm to a child such as beating, kicking -- or sexual abuse. Child neglect occurs when there is a LACK of action by a parent or caretaker to keep a child safe from harm.

A neglectful parent is not fulfilling the child's basic needs for health and safety. A neglected child may not have enough food to eat, not be receiving proper medical care when they're sick, or, not be attending school on a regular basis. Sometimes, a young child will be left home alone or in a locked car, both precarious situations. You will look at the child and realize that they don't have the parental care they need to thrive.

It's important to note that child neglect can occur without deliberate intent on the part of the parent. For instance, the child may not have food or be left alone due a parent's severe depression or other mental illness. A young parent may simply not know how to care for an infant and not feed the baby properly or get the proper medical attention if the baby is sick. But if this lack of action is liable to harm the child, it should be reported. The child's life could be in danger. Reporting the case can get the child and the parents the help that they need.

Sadly, you should also be aware that in some instances, a child can experience both neglect and abuse. For example, children without adequate food, supervision, not attending school, may also experience physical or sexual abuse. I just read a very moving memoir, *Etched in Sand* by Regina Calcaterra. It is an account of how she and her four siblings basically raised themselves -- as their alcoholic, depressed, and often abusive mother, left them alone for weeks at a time. Regina and her young siblings found refuge by sleeping in cars and abandoned houses. They figured out how to steal food from the local stores so that the youngest ones would have milk and food to eat. These children experienced horrific neglect -- and unfortunately -- often abuse as well. What amazes me is that no one noticed that these children were abandoned! No one intervened -- no one helped them. And, this occurred on Long Island, right here in New York, not in some isolated area of the country.

After enduring this tragic lifestyle into her teens, Regina eventually told the authorities with the hope that all of them would be rescued. Regina ended up in foster care and although it too was dire at times, she persevered.

She graduated college, then law school, and has held many important positions in her career. She was truly fortunate. Many neglected children simply don't have the ability to forge ahead with so much working against them. That's why you need to take action if you believe a child is at risk.

Steps to Take

So, what are the steps in making a report? The [New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children](#) (NYSPPC) recommends that all parents and concerned adults learn the basic steps and take action when necessary.

- If you witness a child being abused or neglected 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. Just type the name of your state and child abuse hotline in your web browser and the number will come up. The National Council on Child Abuse and Family Violence has a list for each state. Here is a [link](#) to each state's reporting number.
- You can also call Childhelp, the national child abuse hotline at -1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)

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 or neglect and the nature of the child's injuries or condition. 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 and neglect is preventable. Everyone must be part of the solution; let the solution start with you.

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month. To learn more about how to prevent child abuse and neglect visit www.nyspcc.org.