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If You See Something, Please Do Something to Prevent Child Abuse

Posted: 4/8/2015

See something? Hear something? Please, do something! This is not an alert warning about a strange package on a subway platform. It is an alert for another type of terror: the abuse and neglect of children. It's everyone's job to protect children, not just the job of local authorities. April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month. Make it your time to learn how to help a child who is at-risk.

Although the age of social media has dramatically lowered the threshold on privacy standards, many adults are still reticent about reporting their suspicions about child abuse and neglect. How many times do we hear on the news, "I knew something was wrong, but I never thought he'd hurt the baby." Or, "I was worried about those kids, but not sure what to do." This type of "bystander" behavior is far too common. I'm urging everyone to take the steps needed to protect children. Go with your gut, as we hear all the time about other types of dangerous situations. If something is making you suspicious or uneasy, it's worth reporting.

The statistics are staggering. According to the 2013 national child maltreatment data, approximately 3.5 million reports of child abuse and neglect are reported each year involving over 6.4 million children. Of these reports, 2.1 million referrals were screened in (or accepted) for further investigation involving 3.2 million children. Close to 680,000 children were confirmed as abused or neglected. Babies in their first year of life had the highest rate of victimization. The majority of victims consisted of three races or ethnicities — White (44%), Hispanic (22%) or African-American (21%). The data estimates that 1,520 children died in 2013 from abuse and neglect. Nearly 86% of the children that died were infants to four years-old. The vast majority of the child fatalities (79%) were caused by one or both parents.

Alarmingly, we know that many more children are not brought to the attention of the authorities. It qualifies as an epidemic if you put it in medical terms, and the young victims often endure physical and mental health problems as a result. You would imagine that society would be clamoring for a solution.

You might be thinking, why add to those epidemic numbers? I'll explain. When a child is brought to the attention of the authorities charged with investigating these cases, the children and their parents can get the help that they need to prevent future abuse or neglect and strengthen their family. It can mean the difference between life and death for newborns and children under the age of 4, when most fatalities occur.

Please don't let the worry of "making a mistake" stop you from reporting. Even if you are not 100 percent sure about your concerns, you can — and should — take steps to help the child. I counsel parents that if they have a "reasonable suspicion" that a child is at risk, that's enough to make a call to the state's child abuse hotline. The NYSPCC has a list of all state hotline numbers on their website. It is always best to err on the side of the child. Not reporting the abuse or neglect may mean it will continue. If you make a report in good faith you are immune from any civil or criminal liability.

Much child abuse occurs behind closed doors to very young children and infants. Therefore, it's important for concerned friends, family members and neighbors to be familiar with the signs. And children, particularly younger ones who may not be in school yet, will probably not tell you that they've been hurt, so concerned adults need to be their advocates if they have suspicions. Prevent Child Abuse New York has a guide to signs and symptoms of child physical abuse, sexual abuse and child neglect.

Here are the steps for making a report.

If you see a child being abused or hear a child screaming in pain, call 911. The police are trained to handle these calls. If you have suspicions that a child is at risk for child abuse or neglect, call the state hotline number. A trained specialist will then ask for your name and number, but you can choose to remain anonymous. They will ask you about the child, what you have seen that's concerning and the adults involved. Even if you are not certain about all the specifics, make the call. It's then up to the investigators to follow through. You can be assured that if the hotline took your report, Child Protective Services is responding to the situation.

Yes, taking action will probably make you anxious. That's understandable, as it's such an important undertaking. Nevertheless, you'll rest easier knowing that due to your intervention, the infant, child and their parents will be getting help and attention. Child abuse is preventable. Everyone must be part of the solution.

For more information about keeping your children safe please visit www.nyspcc.org.