

## What is Child Abuse and How to Report It

### What is child abuse?

When people think about child abuse, they usually think of physical and sexual abuse. But more than 50 per cent of children and youth come into provincial government care in Alberta because of neglect. The main types of abuse are:

**Emotional abuse** may take the form of chronic exposure to alcohol or drug abuse, verbal attacks on a child's sense of self, repeated humiliation or rejection. Exposure to violence or severe conflict in the home, forced isolation, restraint or causing a child to be afraid much of the time may also cause emotional harm. Emotional abuse rarely happens only once and it is usually part of a particular way of dealing with a child.

**Neglect** is any lack of care that causes serious harm to a child's development or endangers the child in any way. Physical neglect is the failure to meet the child's day-to-day physical needs. This includes failing to provide adequate nutrition, clothing, shelter, health care and protection from harm. Emotional neglect is the failure to meet the child's ongoing emotional needs for affection and a sense of belonging.

**Physical abuse** is the intentional use of force on any part of a child's body that results in injuries. It may be a single incident or a series or pattern of incidents. The Criminal Code states that physical force cannot be used on children unless the force used is "reasonable" and has been used for "corrective purposes" by a parent or someone acting in the role of parent.

**Sexual abuse** is the improper exposure of a child to sexual contact, activity or behaviour. It includes any sexual touching, intercourse, exploitation or exposure and can be perpetuated by anyone, including a parent, caregiver, extended family, friend, neighbour or stranger.

**Emergency situations** include when the parents, youth or child are intoxicated, high or suicidal, or if a child has been abandoned.

### What contributes to child abuse?

Stress, poor parenting skills, lack of positive parent-child involvement, criminal or mental health problems, many children to care for and poverty are all factors that can lead to child abuse by parents, extended family, friends, neighbours, caregivers and strangers. Research also identifies domestic violence, lack of social supports, history of child abuse, and alcohol and drug abuse as the most frequent contributing factors in substantiated cases of child abuse. (MacLaurin, et al., 2005)

# How to Report Child Abuse

## What to do if a child discloses abuse:

- Listen to the child
- Allow the child to tell what happened in his or her own words
- Do not ask leading questions
- Remain calm and neutral
- Do not over-react, show horror or anger, or any other reaction that would lead the child to believe the abuse or neglect was his or her fault
- Support and acknowledge the child's feelings
- Reassure the child
- Tell the child you believe what you have heard
- Comfort the child by saying that it was a good thing for he or she to tell you
- Assure the child that you will do something to help
- **CALL THE CHILD ABUSE HOTLINE: 1-800-387-KIDS (5437) or contact your local Child and Family Services Authority, Delegated First Nations Agency or police.**

## What information will you need to provide?

- Your name and telephone number (all reports are confidential however you may choose to remain anonymous)
- How long have you known the child/family?
- What is your relationship to the child/family?
- Information about the family
- What is your concern about the child(ren)?
- What have you seen/heard?
- What has the child or others told you?
- Where is the child now?
- What supports (formal or informal) are involved with the family?

## What happens once a report is made?

The information provided by the caller will be reviewed and referred for investigation as needed. Based on the outcome of the investigation, the child and their family may be referred to community supports, receive family enhancement services or actions to further protect the child may be taken.

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**Government of Alberta** ■  
Children and Youth Services