

# DISCIPLINE, GAMES OR ABUSE?

## *Helping Children To Protect Themselves*

No matter how much we love our children, raising them is a demanding and often stressful job. It can bring frustration along with joy. To cope, we refer to our own childhood experiences. For some, this leads to child abuse.

### Physical Abuse

Parents who were abused as children often do not fully understand the harm they cause. Emergency room physicians may be told that a child had an accident. Seldom does an abusive parent admit to causing injury.

Children may go along with the story because they tend to assume responsibility for the incident. They find it difficult to accept that they are abused. When you try to help, they may withdraw.

The law, however, is clear regarding what constitutes abuse. In part, federal law states that it is a crime to cause evidence of "...skin bruising, bleeding, malnutrition, sexual molestation, burns, fracture of any bone, subdural hematoma, soft tissue swelling, failure to thrive, or death, and such condition or death is not justifiably explained, or where the history given concerning such condition or death may not be the product of an accident."

### Sexual Abuse

Statistics show that most sexual molestation is committed by relatives,

friends or neighbors.

Handicapped and retarded children are susceptible, as are younger children in families with child abuse history. Other risky situations include changes in step or foster parents, and young girls frequently left alone with step or foster fathers.

You can protect your children by letting them know they should not want to be touched in the genital, anal or breast areas. You'll be educating them about their bodies. They'll understand that you want to know if they have problems. And if you suspect abuse, watch for signals like these:

- Behavior problems, such as running away or substance abuse.
- Emotional problems. Fear of - grownups, anxiety, guilt or crying.
- Failure to establish or keep

friendships.


- Words or artistic expressions that suggest sexual experience.
- Telling others about sexual experiences.
- Suicide attempts.
- Psychological changes, such as phobia, hysteria or hypochondria.
- Bleeding, infections, rash, and discharge in vaginal, genital or rectal areas.

### You Can Help

You can be caring and alert. Share facts with your own children about abuse and how to guard against it. Prepare them so that they can be wary of friends as well as strangers.

You can support the child who reports physical abuse or sexual molestation to you. You can be sensitive to feelings of fear and guilt.

You can refer situations to child protective services. Adults can be referred to organizations such as Parents Anonymous. You may ask a school counselor to intervene.

The experience of helping a child can be upsetting. Ask for the help of professionals and other parents when you need it. If the child is not your own, it's important to respect the legal and confidentiality rights of the family. 



Professionals will respond to your alert.