

# Prevention of Child Abuse in Early Childhood Programs and the Responsibilities of Early Childhood Professionals to Prevent Child Abuse

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## *A position statement of the* National Association for the Education of Young Children

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Adopted 1996

As the nation's largest organization of early childhood professionals and others dedicated to improving the quality of early childhood programs in centers, schools, and homes, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is committed to safeguarding the well-being of children. Child abuse<sup>1</sup> violates children's health and safety and betrays their trust.

Most child abuse is perpetrated by family members; 1994 figures indicate that in 90% of reported cases of abuse, perpetrators were parents or other relatives (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect 1996). Early childhood programs in centers, homes, and schools can help to minimize the potential for this type of abuse by working to support families and providing referrals to appropriate helping services as needed. Although much less frequent than abuse by family members, child abuse also occurs in out-of-home settings such as schools, child care settings, foster care, or organized youth activities. Child abuse by those working with children violates the fundamental principle of the code of ethical conduct for working with young children: "Above all, we shall not harm children" (NAEYC 1992).

Estimates of the proportion of child abuse in out-of-home settings vary but range from 1% to 7% of reported rates of abuse (Wells et al. 1995). Fortunately, the majority of employees and volunteers working with young children are caring individuals committed to promoting children's safety, healthy development, and learning. However, because previous and potential abusers may seek opportunities with access to children, those organizing and operating any type

of out-of-home setting for children and youth must take proper precautions to minimize the potential for harm to children.

NAEYC deplors child abuse involving any child in any form in any setting and believes that all early childhood professionals, families, and communities must be vigilant in protecting children from all forms of abuse. NAEYC offers the following recommendations as strategies to prevent child abuse in early childhood programs, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, to the greatest extent possible. These recommendations outline specific roles for early childhood professionals, early childhood programs, family members, and public regulation. Particular attention is given to the role of early childhood programs, focusing on the importance of carefully planned and implemented policies with regard to practices with children, staff screening and recruitment, and partnerships with families. In addition, this statement outlines responsibilities of early childhood professionals to prevent child abuse in other settings. These recommendations focus on children birth through age 8 attending any type of group program, including child care centers and preschools, kindergarten and the primary grades, and family child care homes.

### ***Role of early childhood programs***

NAEYC recommends that early childhood programs in centers, homes, and schools adopt policies consistent with the following guidelines. In some cases these policies will be set by a larger organizational structure, such as a school district, religious group, corporation, or community agency.

### **Program policies**

- 1. Early childhood programs should employ an adequate number of qualified staff to work with children**

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<sup>1</sup>Child abuse is defined as any non-accidental injury or pattern of injuries to a child for which there is no 'reasonable' explanation (National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse 1995) and includes physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.

**and to provide adequate supervision of program staff and volunteers.**

Limiting the number of children for which each adult is responsible and the overall group size helps staff to better meet the individual needs of each child. Teachers are better able to provide supervision of all children and to recognize signs or changes in behavior that may indicate the possibility of abuse. NAEYC's accreditation criteria for centers (NAEYC 1991) recommend group sizes of no more than 6 to 8 infants, 8 to 12 toddlers, and 14 to 20 preschoolers, 16 to 20 kindergartners, and 20 to 24 primary grade children, always with at least 2 adults. Smaller numbers may be necessary in the case of children with certain emotional or behavioral problems who require more intensive and direct supervision.

**2. The program environment (both indoor and outdoor areas) should be designed to reduce the possibility of private, hidden locations in which abuse may occur.**

Young children need opportunities for solitude and quiet play in small groups throughout the day, but all early childhood program spaces should be regarded as public. Both indoor and outdoor areas can be set up and designed in such a way that provide opportunities for solitude while also allowing for unobtrusive adult supervision. Likewise, the program environment should be designed to reduce the likelihood that staff members, volunteers, or others have opportunities for hidden interactions with children.

**3. All program staff, substitutes, and volunteers should receive preservice orientation and refresher training at regular intervals that includes, but is not limited to (a) understanding of what constitutes child abuse; (b) the program's discipline policy and appropriate guidance of children; (c) means of preventing potential abuse situations in group settings; (d) identification of signs of potential abuse; and (e) individual obligations and procedures for reporting suspected cases of abuse.**

Individuals who work with young children and their families are obligated to report any suspicion of child abuse to the appropriate authorities. Ensuring that staff members and program volunteers understand and keep abreast of (a) strategies to reduce abuse, (b) potential signs of abuse, and (c) appropriate actions for reporting abuse helps reduce risks and meets legal obligations while minimizing the potential for false reports.

**4. Centers, schools, and homes should have clear policies and procedures for maintaining a safe, secure environment.**

Access to the facility should be controlled, for example, by requiring all visitors to sign in and sign out of the program area or to check in and out with the administrative office. In the case of family child care homes, parents should be informed prior to the use of a substitute, and children should never be left in the care of an individual without their parents' knowledge.

**5. Teachers and caregivers should be supervised by qualified personnel on an ongoing basis, and parents should be encouraged to spend time in the program.**

In instances when a teacher or caregiver works primarily alone, periodic, drop-in visits by supervising personnel, parents, or others should be encouraged; such visits can reduce the isolation sometimes experienced by individual providers.

**6. Programs should *not* institute "no-touch policies" to reduce the risk of abuse.**

In the wake of well-publicized allegations of child abuse in out-of-home settings and increased concerns regarding liability, some programs have instituted such policies, either explicitly or implicitly. No-touch policies are misguided efforts that fail to recognize the importance of touch to children's healthy development. Touch is especially important for infants and toddlers. Warm, responsive touches convey regard and concern for children of any age. Adults should be sensitive to ensuring that their touches (such as pats on the back, hugs, or ruffling the child's hair) are welcomed by the children and appropriate to their individual characteristics and cultural experience. Careful, open communication between the program and families about the value of touch in children's development can help to achieve consensus as to acceptable ways for adults to show their respect and support for children in the program.

**Staff screening, recruitment, and retention policies**

Programs should employ careful screening and recruitment practices to increase the likelihood of selecting appropriate candidates as staff, substitutes, or volunteers to work with children. NAEYC's recommendations reflect the screening decision-making model developed by the American Bar Association's Center for Children and the Law (Wells et al., 1995) that identifies a variety of potential screening mechanisms, including personal interviews; verification of personal and professional references and education qualifications; criminal records checks; and affidavits attesting to history of conviction for abuse or other violent crimes. NAEYC recommends that all early childhood programs in centers, homes

and schools have a comprehensive screening policy in place and that this policy be publicized to existing and potential staff and volunteers, families, and other interested parties.

NAEYC recommends the following guidelines be used in developing a screening policy.

- At a minimum, a basic screening should be conducted on all staff members, substitutes, volunteers, and other individuals who may have access to young children but do not have direct responsibility for their care and education.

For example, bus drivers, janitors, cooks, and administrative assistants should be screened in the case of centers and schools, and all older children and adults present in a family child care provider's home (family members, friends, or employees) should be screened. The basic screening should include a signed, written application; careful review of their employment record; checks of personal and professional references; and a personal interview. Additional screening, such as verification of educational status and checks of motor vehicle record, criminal records, and other registries may be appropriate depending upon the duration, frequency, and type of contact between the adult and child and the degree of supervision. In the case of self-employed family child care providers, public agencies should provide for screening and make the results of the screening available to parents on request.

- All potential employees, substitutes, and volunteers should be required to attest to any previous convictions, in particular, whether they have ever been convicted of any crime against children or other violent crime.

Factors such as the relevance and recency of any conviction and demonstration of rehabilitation should be weighed in making hiring and placement decisions for individuals who admit to previous convictions. A volunteer's or employee's failure to fully disclose previous convictions should be viewed as automatic grounds for dismissal.

- All potential employees and volunteers should be required to provide at least three personal references from previous employers, parents of children served, or educators. Programs should carefully check these references.

- All new employees and volunteers should be required to complete a mandatory probationary period. During the probationary period, the staff member or volunteer should have no unsupervised access to children but should have supervised interactions with children so that their competencies in working with young children can be assessed.

- In addition to screening policies that are designed to ensure that appropriate individuals are engaged to work in

the program, early childhood programs should also have policies designed to retain competent staff and remove others if necessary. Programs that provide competitive salaries, good benefits and working conditions, and regular opportunities for advancement are more likely to recruit and retain competent staff who provide better quality care to children. In addition, the provision of employee assistance programs can provide support to staff facing stressful circumstances thus minimizing the potential for abuse.

Policies should also provide for the removal of individuals whose performance on the job is deemed unacceptable or whose behavior outside the job could affect their performance (such as a bus driver being convicted for driving under the influence.)

- Clear procedures should be in place for responding to an accusation of abuse in the program. These procedures should address steps to protect children and provide due process for the accused, and they should be publicized in advance to staff as well as parents.

### **Policies to promote close partnerships with families**

Ongoing program policies that strengthen partnerships with families can also help to minimize the likelihood of abuse in the program. Examples of such policies include:

1. Programs should strongly encourage and provide ample opportunities for family participation.
2. Family members should have access to any part of the center, school, or family child care home to which children have access while their children are in care.
3. Field trips should include parents when possible, be approved by the program administrator, be supervised by regular program personnel, and be conducted with written parental permission.
4. Programs should require that children be released only to parents or legal guardians or those persons authorized by their parents or guardians in writing. Staff should check identification when authorized individuals are unfamiliar to them.
5. Programs should inform parents of the characteristics of good quality programs and the signs of potential abuse. Parents should also be informed about the child protection practices implemented by the program through (a) written policies shared with parents and family members; (b) access to public records documenting regulatory compliance (when applicable); and (c) publicized mechanisms for registering

complaints and the procedures to be taken in response to a complaint.

Close partnerships with families can also help to reduce the potential for child abuse by family members. Early childhood programs can provide information to parents and families regarding child development and effective strategies for responding to children's behavior. Teachers and caregivers should be knowledgeable about and alert to signs of family stress and provide support to families. Early childhood professionals can collaborate with state agencies, such as protective services, to promote understanding of child development, to support and empower families, and to advocate for children. Working with families in this way may help to break cycles of family violence and prevent children from becoming abusers themselves.

### ***Role of family members***

Parents and other family members can assist in the prevention of child abuse in early childhood programs by:

- Increasing their sensitivity to children's communications;
- Participating in and observing in their children's programs;
- Talking regularly with other families who use the program; and
- Understanding and using child abuse reporting procedures when appropriate.

Children have minimal responsibility in the prevention of child abuse. Indeed, many of the child-oriented abuse prevention materials and techniques that have been developed in the wake of highly publicized allegations of abuse do not reflect an understanding of children's development and learning. They can be confusing to children and promote anxiety and fear. Rather than placing the responsibility on children to prevent abuse, NAEYC believes it is the responsibility of parents, early childhood professionals, and other adults to ensure to the greatest degree possible that abuse does not occur by providing safe, well-planned and supervised environments.

### ***Role of public regulation***

An effective regulation system is an essential component in public efforts to reduce the potential for abuse in early childhood programs. The nature of public regulatory systems governing early childhood programs varies by program auspice. States license or employ other means of regulation for the majority of programs in centers and schools. Nearly

all states also have regulatory processes in place for family child care homes, although it is estimated that only a small fraction of family child care providers in the nation is indeed regulated (Willer et al., 1991).

Public regulatory processes help reduce the potential for abuse when:

- All settings providing education and care to children of two or more families are subject to regulation;
- Waivers that erode the intent of the regulatory standards are not allowed;
- Funding is sufficient to provide adequate regulatory staff for inspection on at least an annual basis.
- Regulatory personnel are knowledgeable about complaint and law enforcement procedures to ensure implementation of all regulatory requirements.
- Regulatory standards require policies regarding parental access to programs, authorization of child release, and parental notification and approval of their child's participation on field trips.
- Parents and the public are provided information about what defines good quality care, regulatory standards and monitoring procedures, and complaint procedures.

Some child care settings are not subject to public regulation, such as in-home care in which families employ someone to care for the child in their home or other private arrangements in which an individual provides care for only one family. Therefore, public mechanisms to prevent child abuse in out-of-home settings must extend beyond traditional licensing and regulatory processes.

Most states require individuals working in schools, centers, and family child care homes to successfully complete a criminal background check prior to full employment. NAEYC supports the use of such background checks, but warns that they are only one of many necessary strategies to reduce risk. Even the most sophisticated system of criminal background checks is limited by the fact that many instances of abuse go unreported and therefore never result in a conviction. Also, no system of background checks can detect first-time or potential abusers. Because many problems exist with the current system of background checks, parents and the community should not be lulled into a false sense of complacency regarding children's safety when such a system is in place. Given this caveat, NAEYC offers these recommendations for the effective use of criminal records checks.

1. The costs of completing a criminal records background check should be kept as low as possible, and the check should be completed in a timely manner.

**2.** The scope of the check should be clear. State regulations vary as to which records are searched: local, state, and/or federal criminal convictions, child abuse registries or sex offender registries. With regard to child abuse registries, states employ different standards as to the type of information recorded, resulting in serious shortcomings of these data. For example, some registries include unsubstantiated allegations, and some registries record instances of abuse by the name of the victim rather than the perpetrator, making it difficult to track abusers (Cohen, 1985).

**3.** If convictions are uncovered, clear procedures for action should be in place. Some states require an individual to undergo a background check before they can be hired to work with children but have no clear procedures for action when substantiated convictions are found.

**4.** Results of background checks should be readily available to families, especially those families using in-home child care, family child care, or other settings exempt from public regulation. Some states have used technology to make information on background checks readily available to families and providers. Colorado has instituted a system that allows access to information at public libraries and child care resource and referral programs. California was the first state to institute a "Child Care Trustline." This database includes current and potential child care providers who have successfully undergone a criminal records background check. Parents and programs can check potential employees against the database to ensure that their names appear (the opposite of a criminal background check in which being listed is a negative.)

### **Role of early childhood professionals**

Monitoring by public agencies helps to ensure basic acceptable levels of quality in early childhood programs. However, it is the responsibility of early childhood professionals to:

**1.** Promote standards of excellence to which programs may strive. NAEYC encourages centers and eligible schools to pursue NAEYC accreditation. This process requires programs to undertake a rigorous self-study process and provides for an independent external assessment to determine whether high standards are met. Other accreditation systems are available for family child care homes and schools not eligible for NAEYC accreditation.

**2.** Assist in informing the public about the need for and the ingredients of high quality early childhood programs.

**3.** Encourage the continued professional development of all early childhood professionals.

**4.** Advocate for well-designed, sufficiently funded, and effectively implemented public regulations and programs that reduce the incidence of abuse against children.

**5.** Understand their ethical obligations to recognize and report suspicions of abuse [See Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment (NAEYC 1992)].

Early childhood professionals can also play an important role in helping to prevent the incidence of child abuse in other settings beyond early childhood programs. The vast majority of child abuse is committed by family members or others who are close to the family. By establishing supporting relationships with families, early childhood professionals may help to reduce the likelihood of child abuse by family members. Programs should make readily available appropriate information and referrals to community services to families under stress and provide information and support for families regarding appropriate discipline and guidance of young children. In addition, early childhood professionals should advocate for effective community support services, including child protective services, social services, and mental health services that include sufficient numbers of qualified staff sensitive to meeting the individual needs of children and families.

### **Conclusion**

The National Association for the Education of Young Children is strongly committed to promoting the high quality of early childhood programs. Practices that lead to high quality programs help to reduce the likelihood of abuse of children in out of home settings, and high quality programs can provide support to families to reduce instances of abuse in the home. Thus, the members of NAEYC pledge their commitment and expertise to work with other concerned individuals and groups to provide a safe and wholesome environment for all of America's children.

## **References**

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## **Resources for further information**

- Code of ethical conduct and statement of commitment. A position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. 1992. Available as a brochure (NAEYC #503/Spanish edition #504).
- Healthy Young Children: A Manual for Programs*, 1995 edition. A.S. Kendrick, R. Kaufmann, & K.P. Messenger (Eds.). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children. (NAEYC #704).
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