

# West Alabama Children's Advocacy Center

280 Stadium Circle, P.O. Box 685, Vernon, AL 35592 -- 205-695-8100



**"Believe the hurt, begin the healing"**

## **What is the West Alabama Children's Advocacy Center**

The purpose of the West Alabama Children's Advocacy Center is two-fold: To provide a safe, and child friendly environment in which sexually and/or physically abused children and their families are helped to deal with the effects of abuse in a manner which promotes healing and to coordinate community services in the prevention, investigation, prosecution, and treatment of abused children through a Multidisciplinary Team approach.

The Child Advocacy Center has been established to ensure that these children will not be further victimized by the very system that is supposed to protect them. For this abused child, the innocence of childhood becomes a continuing nightmare. A child can be interviewed as many as 14 to 17 times by lawyers, police, doctors, social workers and counselors if the case is brought into the criminal justice system. This pain of humiliation and embarrassment of reliving this nightmare again and again intensifies each time he or she has to tell the story to total strangers. Often times these interviews are conducted in undesirable settings such as police stations, courthouses and school hallways, none of which are conducive to the emotional well being of the children.

This center will provide a place where there will be an opportunity for a team of sympathetic professionals to minimize the number of times a story needs to be retold. The child becomes familiar with this team who will be a friend, advisor and guide throughout what may be long and confusing court cases. The facility is designed and furnished with child victims in mind, with the idea being to make them feel safe instead of threatened.

## **REPORTER'S WORKSHOP**

***Who speaks for me,***

***Young, innocent of power,***

***Voiceless in the chambers of decision,***

***Unrecognized, unknown,***

***Who will reach inside my heart and mind,***

*And understand the thoughts I cannot phrase,*

*And who will look beyond my anger,*

*This mask of hate,*

*And care about the hurt and pain,*

*Surely there are those who sense,*

*What is not shared,*

*Who warm to words that are not spoken,*

*Who unfurl banners in another's cause,*

*Who will speak for the children!*

**Anonymous**

## **WHAT IS CHILD ABUSE**

Child abuse is harm or threatened harm to a child's health or welfare which can occur through non-accidental physical or mental injury; sexual abuse or attempted sexual abuse; sexual exploitation or attempted sexual exploitation.

## **WHAT IS CHILD NEGLECT**

Negligent treatment or maltreatment of a child including the failure to provide adequate food, medical treatment, clothing, or shelter.

*Exception: A parent or guardian legitimately practicing his religious beliefs and does not provide medical treatment for a child. This does not preclude a court from ordering the medical services to be provided where the child's health requires it.*

## **WHO ARE MANDATORY REPORTERS**

Doctors, surgeons, medical examiners, coroners, dentists, nurses, and pharmacists

Schoolteachers and school personnel

Law enforcement officers and officials

Social Workers

Day care workers and employees

Mental health professionals

Persons who render aid or medical assistance to any child when the child is known or suspected to be a victim of abuse or neglect

## **WHAT IS YOUR LIABILITY?**

All persons reporting suspected abuse or neglect (whether required by law or not) are presumed to be acting in good faith. Alabama law provides immunity from liability for actions by mandatory reporters.

## **WHAT TO INCLUDE IN A REPORT?**

The child's name and location

The parents' names and address

Your name and the name of your agency, school or organization

A clear and concise description of the abuse and/or neglect with as many specific details as possible

## **WHAT TO DO IN AN EMERGENCY?**

If a life threatening situation exists, make sure the person taking your call understands that emergency intervention is needed.

## **WHEN TO REPORT?**

Whenever you know or suspect that a child is being abused or neglected. Use your professional training and expertise to make this decision. It is not necessary to prove that the abuse or neglect happened. If you are reasonably suspicious, you **MUST** report. It is better to err on the side of wrongful reporting than to risk further injury or the death of a child. Do not delay reporting if you do not have all of the needed information. Additional information can be added later.

## **HOW TO REPORT**

### **Call your local Department of Human Resources and/or your Sheriff's Department:**

Lamar County DHR: 205-695-5000

Lamar County Sheriff's Department: 205-695-7470

Fayette County DHR: 205-932-1665

Fayette County Sheriff's Department: 205-932-3205

Pickens County DHR: 205-367-8184

Pickens County Sheriff's Department: 205-367-2000

## **RED FLAGS OF PHYSICAL ABUSE**

### **UNEXPLAINED BRUISES**

Appearing on the soft tissue of the face (black eyes), on the genitals, back, buttocks, or upper thigh

Reflecting the shape of a belt buckle, extension cord, handprints, etc.

Child is furtive or embarrassed when bruises are discussed

Child has many "accidents" at home and seems secretive about what happened

Child complains of beatings

### **UNEXPLAINED LACERATIONS**

To the face, mouth, eyes, gums, etc.

To the external genitals

To the legs, arms, torso that mimic the imprint of a belt, extension cord, coat hanger

### **UNEXPLAINED BURNS**

Cigarette burns on the body

Scald burns that look like immersion burns

Rope burns or abrasions

## **RED FLAGS OF PHYSICAL ABUSE**

### **BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS**

Fear of parents or caretaker.

Reluctant to go home

Difficulty in walking, limping, sore joints

Listless, detached, withdrawn, preoccupied, extremely aggressive

School performance deteriorates; achievement does not reflect ability

Wears inappropriate clothing, i.e., long sleeves and does not want to dress out for physical education class

## **PARENTAL BEHAVIORS**

Show little feeling or compassion for the child

Belittles the child

Have unrealistic or bizarre expectations

Expect the child to conform to rigid standards of behavior

Give vague or inconsistent explanations of accidents or injuries

## **RED FLAGS OF PHYSICAL NEGLECT**

Failure to meet a child's minimum needs for food, clothing,

Shelter, supervision, education, medical care, etc.

## **PHYSICAL INDICATORS**

Underweight, often hungry, pale

Eyes are listless, sunken, dark circles

Poor hygiene, dirty bodies, dirty or ill-fitting clothing, offensive body odor

Unattended medical needs

## **BEHAVIOR INDICATORS**

Begs, steals or hides food

Reports that he is left at home alone for extended periods

Fatigued and preoccupied

Seeks affection or attention inappropriately

## **PARENTAL BEHAVIORS**

Leaves child unattended for long periods of time

Seems unconcerned for the child's physical needs

Chronically does not provide food or money to purchase food at school

Refuse to obtain needed medical and/or dental treatment for the child

## **RED FLAGS OF SEXUAL ABUSE**

### **PHYSICAL INDICATORS**

Difficulty in walking or sitting

Lack of bowel control

Bloody discharge in pre-menstrual girls or anal bleeding in boys

Venereal disease

Complains of pain, itching or swelling in the genital area

### **BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS**

Child discloses he/she has been sexually abused

Bizarre or unusual sexual behaviors

Knowledge of sexual behaviors inappropriate for child's age

Excessive masturbation

Lack of self-esteem, depression

Child talks of "secrets" that cannot be told

### **PARENTAL BEHAVIORS**

Perceive the child as "different" or "bad"

Belittle or humiliate the child

Insist that the child be treated differently

Express or show no affection toward the child

### **WHY CHILDREN DO NOT DISCLOSE**

Feelings of shame

Lack of trust

Low self-esteem

Unaware that the activity is inappropriate

Fear of breaking up the family

Fear of alienation of family member

Fear of isolation from others

Threats, Chaotic lifestyle

Confusion

Dependency needs of the victim

Ill-equipped to deal with the outside world

## **DISCUSSING ABUSE WITH A CHILD**

### **Five Critical Components Are:**

Believe him or her! ...Empower...Support... Report...Follow up

## **TIPS TO CONSIDER WHEN TALKING WITH PARENTS IN DISTRESS**

Establish rapport

Be non judgmental and uncritical

Demonstrate genuine concern and understanding

Try to determine, gently, what issues concern the parents

Use lots of reflective statements and use your listening skills. "It sounds like you feel frustrated now"

Do not agree with or condone, just listen

Understand the parent may be feeling very stressed and may not know how to deal with the situation

Be supportive but do not pity

Emphasize anything positive

Give lots of praise for seeking help

Help parents draw on their own strengths

Work to make parents feel valued as individuals

Help them verbalize how they feel

Help them find places for support such as social agencies, churches, family, etc.

## **TIPS TO CONSIDER WHEN TALKING WITH A CHILD IN DISTRESS**

Show your concern

Establish a trusting relationship

Maintain openness and composure

Let the child talk at his/her own pace

Talk with the child in a quiet place where you will not be disturbed

Allow the child to end the conversation when the child exhibits discomfort

Be aware of the child's readiness to resume the discussion at a later date

Allow the child to use his/her own words but check to make sure you both understand their meaning

Remember the child will feel anxiety/fear

Believe the child throughout the process

Do not express negative or discrediting attitudes toward the parents/caretaker

Do not convey anger or impatience if the child does not fully disclose

Do not ask "Why" questions. Ask "How?" "What?" "When?" and "Where?" questions

The Child Advocacy Center is a non-profit organization led by a Board of Directors. Funding is provided through a combination of state funds, as well as civic and individual donations, grants, and fundraising.

If you are a member of a civic group, club, church group or other organization, and would be interested in a presentation or additional information, call:

***West Alabama Children's Advocacy Center, Inc.***

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*VERNON, AL 35592*

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