

# Early Childhood Exchange



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**WLEX**

Child abuse at child care? Yes, it can happen, and that possibility sends a chill through us all.

But let's not overstate the risk. According to research by David Finkelhor (University of New Hampshire), children are more likely to be sexually abused at home than at a child care center. He estimates that one child in every 1,800 is sexually abused in child care, while one in every 1,100 is so abused at home.

Finkelhor's data were collected from 1983 to 1985, before the state of Wisconsin began requiring all childcare staff in licensed settings to fill out a notarized background verification form. The form asks questions about criminal convictions and pending charges potentially related to the care of children. Some potential child care workers have backed out of the hiring process when faced with this form, although no one has kept track of how many.

But couldn't someone falsify their background information? To see how well the background check was working, the Dept.

of Health and Social Services drew a random sample of 5% of all licensed child care operators in the state in 1987. They sent the names of all 610 employees from these programs to the Crime Information Bureau for a criminal record check. They found, first, that not a single individual had falsified the form. Second, while about 3% of the sample had convictions or pending charges against them, and 4% had an arrest record, none were related to the care of children. (According to the FBI, employment screens generally find about 8% of applicants with an arrest record.) Good news indeed!

The state's actions help, but there is also much that childcare teachers themselves can do to prevent child abuse in our profession. The following article tells you what you need to know.

In the next several issues of the ECX, I will be reporting to you the results of a statewide survey of pay, benefits, and job satisfaction of Wisconsin child care teachers and family day care providers. There is both good and bad news to report, and even some surprises. Stay tuned in!

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'DR'.

**Dave Riley**  
University of Wisconsin-Extension

# Child Abuse Prevention Issues for Child Care Professionals

W. Anthony Donohue, Ph.D.

Due to a number of highly publicized and emotionally charged child abuse incidents, national attention has recently been focused on the risk of abuse to children by caregivers in child care settings. This article will address a number of child abuse issues that are of particular importance to child care professionals. How can we protect children from abuse?

## What is Child Abuse?

Any discussion of child abuse needs to focus on the four types of abuse:

- **physical abuse:** Any intentional, non-accidental, physical injury to a child inflicted by a caregiver, or other person responsible for the child's welfare.
- **sexual abuse:** Any involvement of a child in a sexual act or situation, the purpose of which may be to provide sexual gratification or financial benefit to the perpetrator. Any sexual activity between a caregiver and a child is considered to be sexual abuse.
- **emotional abuse:** Any act of commission (such as intentional berating, disparaging, or other abusive behavior) or omission (such as passive or aggressive inattention to a child's emotional needs) on the part of the caregiver.
- **neglect:** Neglect (or deprivation of necessities) includes failure, when able to do so, to provide the following: nourishment, clothing, shelter, health care, education, and supervision.

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Based on these definitions, child abuse can include a range of unacceptable caregiver behaviors such as striking a child, whether it leaves bruises or not; fondling a child sexually; ridiculing or humiliating a child for mistakes; and never hugging a child, smiling at him, or speaking to her affectionately.

## What Are the Causes of Child Abuse?

There are a number of reasons why child abuse can occur. Physical abuse is often related to a deep-seated belief in physical punishment as a deterrent to further wrongdoing, and as a consistent approach to dealing with children's behavior problems. In addition, the fact that many adults were physically punished themselves as children adds to the conviction that physical punishment is the only way to assure that the child will grow up to be a responsible adult.

We learn how to raise children from our parents, just as they learned from their parents, and our children will learn from us. Adults who were physically, sexually, or emotionally abused as children frequently believe that this is the only way to punish their own children, or the children in their care. In addition, people sometimes feel pressured to punish children in ways that they would not choose themselves.

Child abuse can also be caused by a lack of knowledge about how children grow and develop, and about how to guide children's behavior appropriately. Caregivers who do not know what to expect of children at different ages may expect two-year-olds to act like four-year-olds and "lose their cool" when the children are not able to meet these unrealistic expectations. The potential for abuse is also present when a caregiver only knows one form of discipline, usually physical punishment, and is unwill-

ing to learn any other ways to guide children's behavior.

Child abuse can result from severe and prolonged stress on the caregiver. This stress can bring out abusive behaviors that might usually be kept under control. Abusive caregivers are usually unable to handle stress well, and may always seem to be "in crisis." Frequently, they are the type of person who is unable to handle criticism and is unable to learn from their experiences. Abuse can also be the result of low self-esteem on the part of the caregiver. Sexual

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abusers, for example, often have deep, unmet emotional needs causing them to seek approval and love through a sexual relationship with a child.

Young children are at particular risk of abuse since they are often too young to understand the nature of the behavior forced upon them. In addition, most abuse takes place within an ongoing relationship between the child and a trusted adult whom the child has been taught to respect and obey, such as parents, relatives, and caregivers. Finally, virtually all children are smaller than their abusers and lack the emotional, cognitive, and physical skills to resist the abuse.

As you can see, some of the causes of child abuse are related to the individual's own personal background combined with his or her present circumstances, and the presence of vulnerable young children. Given the right combination of factors, anyone can be a potential or actual abuser, and child abuse can occur in any child care setting. The factors that place caregivers at the greatest risk include: having been abused as a child; personal stress; occupational stress; an inability to manage stress in

positive ways; lack of knowledge about child development and unrealistic expectations of children; low self-esteem; and the presence of a vulnerable child.

### **The Need for Child Abuse Prevention in Child Care Settings**

There are certain factors in child care that can place caregivers at risk of abusing children. We have to be honest about the child care profession and recognize that providing child care is hard and demanding work that is not always valued by society in general. We know that working with young children can be extremely stressful, and our relationships with the children's parents are often not as cooperative and positive as we would like.

In addition, child care workers are often underpaid, since most programs find it difficult to pay staff what they are really worth. Problems with staffing coverage can lead to a number of other potential risks. Caregivers may be left alone with children, or there may be little direct supervision. Child care professionals also need to have a broad range of skills and knowledge, covering child development from birth up to 12 years. When children of different ages are present, knowledge of child development can prevent unrealistic expectations.

In addition to these factors, family day care providers face challenges that place them at particular risk of accusation.



Provider's are alone with the children in their care, and have little, if any, direct supervision. Since they work alone, providers are not a member of a child care team, and may have minimal support systems. Finally, members of the provider's family live in the child care setting. They may have daily contact with the children and they may place additional demands on the provider.

If we look closely at these factors we can characterize child care jobs, even in "quality" centers and homes, as having high occupational stress, low occupational status, minimal support, low pay, and long hours all of which can lead to an increased risk of child abuse. If we add to these factors other possibilities such as abuse in the caregiver's own background, high personal stress, poor ability to manage stress, low self-esteem, or the presence of vulnerable children, we can understand why there is the potential for child abuse in any child care center or family day care home.

### **Child Abuse Prevention as a Quality Care Issue**

Many of the abuse risk factors in child care are clearly related to quality care issues. And no matter how good the program is, if children are not safe from harm, quality child care is not a reality. As a child care professional, you can integrate quality care and child abuse prevention by being sure the following features are included in your program:

**1. Preventive Administrative Practices.** Be sure that written policies on attendance, transfer of responsibility from parent to caregiver, observation, supervision, discipline, and touch are known and followed by all staff members, substitutes, and volunteers. Make sure you have written permission from parents for pick up of children by adults other than parents. Written procedures should also exist for dealing with suspected or confirmed abuse of children by staff, parents, or strangers.

**2. Maintain Careful Hiring Practices and Staff Supervision.** Carefully check all applicants for employment by talking with past employers. Observe prospective caregivers, substitutes, and volunteers working with the children in your program as part of your hiring/screening process. Develop interview questions that help you assess the applicants' philosophy, beliefs and approach to discipline, touch, and working with parents. Be sure that every caregiver who is responsible for a group of children is within sight of another caregiver, or is regularly supervised.

**3. Well-Managed Stress.** Recognize that stress is an occupational hazard for all staff members and take steps to manage both individual and group stress. Provide regular staff rest periods away from the children, and be sure staff recognizes the need for breaks and take them without feelings of guilt. Recognize the signs of staff burnout and boredom, and take steps to help the staff member.

**4. Maintain Adequate Supervision of Children.** Be sure that staff-child ratios and group size guidelines are always followed. Never leave children unattended. Be sure that unknown adults are prohibited access to the children.

**5. Use of Discipline, not Punishment.** Have a written discipline policy and make sure that everyone who works with the children comply with it. Be sure that threats, shaming, ridicule, and physical punishment are never used when correcting children's behavior. Be sure positive language is used consistently in stating expectations or when guiding children's behavior. Provide training on positive guidance techniques with young children.

**6. Have Realistic Expectations of Children.** Make sure staff expectations of children are flexible, not rigid, and are presented to children in a clear and consistent manner. Make sure staff expectations are age-appropriate. Make sure the emphasis is directed toward children's needs, not toward adult needs.



**7. Promote Positive Self-Esteem in Children.** Promoting a positive self-concept among children has long been a goal of early childhood programs. Since we know children with low self-esteem are more vulnerable to abuse, this goal should continue to be emphasized, as part of the effort to help children protect themselves.

**8. Maintain a Healthy, Safe Environment.** Be sure the environment is clean and safety procedures are followed. Keep rooms in the environment as open and visible as possible. Be sure toileting and diapering areas are observable and not far away from the classroom area. Make sure unknown adults are prohibited access to children. Place your emphasis on managing the environment, not on managing the children.

**9. Maintain Open Communication with Parents.** Establish an atmosphere in which parents can discuss problems, and in which caregivers can be open and caring in

their responses to parents' questions and concerns. Parents should be encouraged to visit and observe your program, and to ask questions to clarify concerns about touching or caregiver-child interactions. Make sure written policies for attendance, transfer of responsibility from parents to caregivers, child observation, supervision, discipline, and touch are explained to parents. Encourage parents to use community resources for personal and family problems.

**10. Learn to Recognize Signs of Child Abuse and Neglect.** Inform your staff of procedures to follow in identifying and reporting suspected abuse. Include a scan for indications of possible abuse in the daily health check each morning. Know the indicators of the potential for abuse and neglect and pay special attention to a caregiver who demonstrates the following types of behaviors:

- a caregiver who targets one or two children for criticism or punishment;
- a caregiver who uses guilt, fear, and threats to control children's behavior;
- a caregiver who is very inattentive or negligent in his/her supervision of the children;
- a caregiver who roughly grabs or jerks children who are misbehaving;
- a caregiver who believes that physical punishment is needed to control children's behavior;
- a caregiver who appears to have strong emotional needs which she/he expects the children to meet.

You will also want to pay close attention to the behavior of the children and their interactions with the caregiver. The following children's behaviors are indications that there is potential for abuse or neglect in the child care setting:

- children who seem watchful, anxious, or wary of the caregiver's physical touch;
- children who seem afraid to go into certain parts of the home or center;

- children who seem unnaturally well-behaved, or overly compliant;
- children who seem to be engaged in excessive caretaking of the caregiver;
- children who display self-abusive behaviors, or unusually abusive behaviors directed toward other children.

### **Child Abuse Prevention: Our Professional Responsibility**

These steps are not a guarantee that child abuse will not occur in your program. However, careful attention to these issues can minimize the risk. As child care professionals we need to protect the children in our care from unsafe practices that place them at risk, and from people who are at risk of abusing children. You also have a responsibility to your staff and program to protect yourself from false accusations.

Children have a right to be safe. As a society, we have a responsibility to protect children from such harm at the hands of their parents, relatives, caregivers, or strangers. Children need adults to protect them and to teach them to protect themselves in ways that do not interfere with their normal, healthy, and positive development. As child care professionals, this responsibility falls especially to us.

### **Child Abuse Prevention Programs: Unintended Consequences.**

In the rush to develop prevention programs, and out of fear of false accusations, a number of unintended consequences have resulted.

One adverse effect of child abuse prevention efforts has been a growing suspicion about men in child care. The focus on sexual abuse cases have placed men under increased scrutiny, and may have fueled a growing reluctance to hire men in child care positions. Men in the child care field have had to face prejudicial attitudes, mistrust, and suspicion by parents and coworkers. As men exit or are barred from the field due to these concerns, we are losing a valuable

resource for children, and the profession.

There is also concern that the fear of accusations has led caregivers to exhibit less natural, safe, appropriate, and nurturing affection and touch. As child care professionals, we are well aware of the important role touching plays in nurturance and guidance. However, concerns over accusations about child abuse have led many caregivers to pull away from the children in order to protect themselves.

Finally, there has been a natural tendency to extend prevention programs to ever younger children, and to expect them to be capable of protecting themselves from abuse. However, this is an unrealistic expectation, and there is considerable cause for concern about the use of inappropriate teaching materials with young children. Research evidence suggests that even very young children (i.e., three- or four-year-olds) can be taught basic safety rules. However, the child development literature suggests that concepts such as "good touch" and "bad touch" (on which most prevention programs are based) are too complex for preschool children to grasp and retain, much less apply to a specific situation.

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***... the fear of accusations has led caregivers to exhibit less ... nurturing affection and touch.***

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In addition, these programs deal with issues such as sexual abuse and abduction that are frightening to children. These programs are based on the belief that knowledge about abuse is necessary for children to protect themselves. As a result, young children who take part in a prevention program may become more fearful, mistrustful of adults in general, and more insecure: results that are clearly contrary to the goals of abuse prevention.

### **Conclusion**

Child abuse is a wide-spread problem with detrimental, long-term effects on chil-

dren, and clearly prevention is one of the most powerful and effective tools for dealing with this problem. However, the potential for adverse effects from our prevention efforts, on the field in general, and especially on young children, calls for rethinking our priorities and practices. The goal of any prevention effort is to protect the children, but we must make sure that in that effort we do not harm children in other ways. As child care professionals we have a responsibility to protect the children in our care, but we must be careful that our prevention efforts do not transfer our responsibility for protection of the children to the children themselves, do not prohibit qualified men from working with young children, and do not prevent caregivers from touching children in safe, healthy ways. By integrating our efforts at improving the quality of care with the goal of protecting the children in our care, we can take positive steps toward child abuse prevention in family day care homes and child care centers.

### **Wisconsin Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse**

Printing of this issue was donated by the Wisconsin Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, a private, nonprofit statewide organization of volunteers and professionals working together to prevent physical, emotional, and sexual abuse through education, advocacy, and resources and support for parents. WCPA is the central office for Parents Anonymous support groups in Wisconsin and is also the state chapter of the Chicago-based National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse.

For membership information and a list of resources, write: Wisconsin Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, 1045 E. Dayton Street, Rm. 202D, Madison, WI, 53703. (608) 256-3374. Sally Casper, Executive Director. You can purchase the following from WCPA:

<u>Selected Child Abuse Information &amp; Resources</u>	
<u>Directory</u>	2.00
<u>Child Care and the Family</u>	4.00
<u>When School's Out and Nobody's Home</u>	4.00
<u>Guidelines for Establishing Family Resource Programs</u>	3.50

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*For further information and a list of child abuse prevention materials for child care professionals call or write to Early Childhood Studies Program, University of Minnesota, 201 Westbrook Hall, 77 Pleasant Street S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455 (612-625-1088).*



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