

# PARENTAL ALERT

by Mary L. Pulido, Ph.D.

## Steps to take if you think a child is being abused.



Concerned parents shudder in horror and disbelief as they listen to another heart-wrenching story in the news about a child harmed by his or her parents, a babysitter or a trusted friend. It's hard to imagine anyone hurting a defenseless, innocent child, but it happens. In New York City, more than 200 cases of child abuse are reported every day. On average, 60 children die in New York State every year as a result of abuse or neglect, and 1,000 die nationwide. Often, the child is not known to us personally, just another tragic figure adding to the daily statistics.

But, what do you do if you suspect a child you know is at risk? What if you are not 100 percent sure about your concerns? Even if this is the case, you can and should take steps to help rescue the child from a potentially abusive situation—it could mean the difference between life and death.

I tell parents that if they have “reasonable suspicion” to believe a child is at risk, call the state child abuse hotline. Much of child abuse occurs behind closed doors. Therefore, it is crucial for concerned friends, family members and neighbors to be familiar with the warning signs. Also, because children, particularly younger ones who may not be in school yet, will probably not tell you that they have been hurt, concerned adults need to be children's advocates when suspicions arise.

### Signs of Abuse and Neglect

It's not always easy to tell if a child was hurt while playing or roughhousing, or if he was deliberately harmed by his caretakers. Here are some guidelines for telling the difference:

- Physical abuse often leaves bruises, particularly bruises in different stages of healing. As bruises change color when they heal, if you see a black and blue mark paired with a yellow or greenish mark on a child's skin, it may be cause for concern.
- Cuts, burn marks, grip marks on the arms or neck, and bruises in odd spots, such as the cheeks, neck or back, are also potential signs of abuse.
- Behavior can be an indicator too. A child who has been abused may act withdrawn, sad or anxious, or, conversely, angry and defiant.
- Any injury on an infant should warrant further inquiry; infants are completely dependent on their caretakers.

The signs of sexual abuse may be harder to detect. Sex abuse offenses range from fondling to intercourse, as well as using a child for pornographic means. Sexually abused children may exhibit sexual behavior way beyond what is expected for a child's age. A young child may have sudden, unusual toilet habits including bedwetting, or have bruises, itching or bleeding in the genital area. The child may not want to be left alone with certain individuals. If you observe any of this behavior, gently explore your concerns.

Children can also be neglected, meaning that parents may not be fulfilling their children's basic needs for health and safety. Neglect can seriously harm children. A neglected child may not have enough food to eat, not be receiving proper medical care or not be attending school on a regular basis. Sometimes, a child will be left home alone or in a locked car—both precarious situations.

### Steps to Take

What are the steps in making a report? The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC) recommends that all parents learn the basic steps and take action when necessary.

- If you see a child being abused or hear a child screaming in pain, call 911. The police are trained to respond to these sensitive calls, and in doing so you may save a child's life.

- Every state has a hotline number you can call to make a report, if you suspect a child is at risk. (NY: (800)342-3720, NJ: (800)792-8610, CT: (800)842-2288.)

When you make a report, the police or the state hotline will request information on what you have suspicions about or witnessed. You should mention the age and whereabouts of the child, the person who is perpetrating the abuse and the nature of the child's injuries. The official will ask for your name and number, but you can choose to remain anonymous. Even if you are not certain about all of the specifics, MAKE THE CALL. It's then up to the investigators to follow a course of action.

Yes, taking action will probably make you anxious—that's understandable as it's such an important undertaking. Yet, you'll rest easier knowing that due to your intervention, the child and his or her parent(s) can get help and attention. Remember, child abuse is preventable. Everyone must be part of the solution; let the solution start with you.

Continue reading for more details and resources for detecting and preventing child abuse and neglect.

## Web sites for Parent & Family Resources

The Web sites below are maintained by nonprofit or government organizations that provide free information to all those interested in parenting issues.

• **National Clearinghouse for Child Abuse & Neglect Information**, [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov), a Web site for parents and professionals on how to detect, report and prevent child abuse and neglect.

• **National PTA**, [www.pta.org/parent\\_resources.html](http://www.pta.org/parent_resources.html), parent resources on school-related issues such as bullying, classroom behavior, parent/teacher meetings and more.

• **Prevent Child Abuse New York (PCANY)**, [www.preventchildabuseny.org](http://www.preventchildabuseny.org), a nonprofit organization that seeks to increase understanding of the problem of child abuse. Reach PCANY's 24-hour Prevention and Parent Helpline at (800)342-7472.

• **The Administration for Children Services (ACS)**, [www.nyc.gov/html/acs/html/home/home.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/acs/html/home/home.shtml), family support, youth support, legal services, and resources for adoption and foster care.

## About The NYSPCC

Founded in 1875 in Manhattan, The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC) is the world's first child protection agency. It works to develop and execute the best practice programs that protect children from harm and ensure their healthy development. The NYSPCC has handled more than 650,000 cases on behalf of over two million children and has educated over 42,000 professionals working with children on child abuse and neglect issues.

The NYSPCC's programs help children recover from the traumas of physical and/or sexual abuse, child neglect and domestic violence. They also promote healthy parenting through skills training, education and guidance; teach professionals about detecting and reporting abuse and neglect; facilitate visits between children and their non-custodial parents in a supportive environment; and advocate for legislative action that protects children and strengthens families.

For more information, visit [www.nyspcc.org](http://www.nyspcc.org).

*Mary L. Pulido, Ph.D, currently serves as the executive director of The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. She has held senior management positions at the Child Protection Center of Montefiore Medical Center— a certified Child Advocacy Center; The Children's Village— a long-term residential treatment facility for abused children; and at Covenant House/Under 21— a crisis shelter for children. In 2006, Mayor Bloomberg appointed her to the NYC Child Fatality Review Panel. Pulido also provides consultation for trauma recovery program planning and development. Pulido is an assistant professor at the Hunter College School of Social Work*