



## **The Role of Community-Based Organizations in Protecting Children from Abuse**

In any community, there are a number of organizations that either serve or come in contact with children and their families. These may include afterschool programs, faith-based organizations, houses of worship, sports teams or leagues, mentoring programs, and neighborhood centers. Because adults have the primary responsibility for keeping children safe from child abuse, these organizations are uniquely positioned to support the child abuse prevention efforts of schools, and to reinforce the messages of the Speak Up Be Safe program in the community. They also can play a key role in supporting children and families by serving as a broad network of safe adults. The following considerations are offered to these organizations and to those involved in them as ways to actively take on these roles. Preventing child abuse is truly a community-wide effort.

### **What Your Organization Can Do**

- Understand how to recognize the warning signs for abuse in children AS WELL AS the warning signs in adult behaviors.
- Recognize and work to address the community factors, particularly those that are social and economic, that may be predictors of increased parent/caretaker stress. For example, are families struggling to access adequate child care in your area? Do parents/caretakers have to travel a great distance to access a grocery store?
- Educate your organization about the role and resources of child protection workers and agencies. Approach this learning as an opportunity to build partnerships. Invite someone from a local child protection services office to speak with your organization.
- Take an unapologetic, proactive stand around reporting suspected child abuse. This can be communicated through organizational policies and procedures, and in public marketing campaigns. Creating a community norm that the role of child protection belongs to all community adults, can build a broad base of support.
- Educate your organization about how to report suspected child abuse.
- Know the resources in your area for parents or caregivers, families, and children. These may include; domestic violence shelters, family resource centers, agencies that offer parent education, and support

groups for survivors of abuse Helping to create a resource directory and sharing it with the schools in the community can be a great benefit to local families.

- Establish child protection and safer care protocols within your organization. These should be in writing and consistently implemented. For example, in group care settings, limiting times that one adult is alone with one child. This includes child care offered in settings that may not be viewed as typical group care, such as care provided during worship services.
- Recognize that all children are at risk for child abuse, but some groups of children are particularly vulnerable. If your organization serves or includes these groups, take added precautions to safeguard them from potentially abusive situations.
- Develop a relationship with local law enforcement. Your organization should have clear protocols in place for running background checks on all staff and volunteers who come in contact with children and youth. Although these can be expensive for volunteer-based or non-profit organizations, local law enforcement can often reduce or eliminate the associated fees.
- Consider ways that your organization can build on the existing strengths within families. Connecting families with one another to build formal or informal support networks can serve as an invaluable resource. Work to understand differences in culture and language.
- Understand and educate your organization on the appropriate questions that parents and caregivers should ask when their child or children are in your care. Help staff and volunteers to respond appropriately rather than making it more difficult for parents to ask with a negative or defensive response. Better yet, anticipate the questions and provide parents with the answers proactively.
- Model the protective behaviors that we want parents and caregivers to use. For example, if your organization has an outreach program or initiative to children in a specific area, engage parents first by gaining permission for their child to participate and by explaining the ways that you will ensure that their child will be safe in your care (i.e., what are your protocols).
- Build relationships with neighborhood leaders where you provide services or engage with children and families.
- Work together with community members, neighborhood leaders, and agency personnel to identify aspects of your community that may increase risk of abuse for children and aspects that may support children in being safe from abuse.
- Ask parents and caregivers – “What barriers do you face to keeping your children safe?”
- Ask yourself – “Are there safe places/facilities for children in our community? How can we make places where children can safely congregate?”
- Build alliances between non-profit and other youth-serving organizations to build accountability and share resources for the protection of children. This alliance could also serve as an advocacy group.

- Engage in public awareness activities that raise awareness in the community on the issue of child abuse and strategies for prevention.
- Offer parent education programs that support healthy parenting practices, child safety skills, and protocols for reporting suspected maltreatment in a nonjudgmental manner. Some programs can be led by professionals and others can be facilitated by parents to provide mutual support. It is always helpful to include parents in the planning.
- Take your role as a protector of children from child abuse seriously!!

Community-based agencies working together and with local schools and other government agencies can develop partnerships to promote prevention efforts and meet the needs of the community. Working together can help strengthen families and communities and prevent child abuse.