

**British Columbia Foster Care  
Education Program**

**CARING FOR CHILDREN:  
WHEN CHILDREN EXPERIENCE  
ABUSE AND NEGLECT  
(6 HOURS)**

**Ministry of Children and Family Development**



## **About the Author**

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# INTRODUCTION

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## A. RATIONALE

Many children who come into care have experienced abuse and neglect. Caregivers need to know how to recognize the symptoms of abuse and neglect as often they will be the first to realize the extent and intensity of the maltreatment of the child placed with them.

Caregivers need to be able to listen to the child placed in their care when the child discloses information about abuse or neglect. In this module, caregivers will learn about the various aspects of abuse and neglect, and how to recognize symptoms or indicators of abuse and neglect. They will also have an opportunity to practice and improve their skills in order to respond effectively to children in care who have been abused or neglected.

## B. LEARNING OUTCOMES

### SESSION I

The caregiver can:

- describe ways in which people, including themselves, may respond to and feel about child abuse and neglect.
- identify self care strategies when working with children who have experienced abuse and neglect.
- describe types of abuse and neglect (physical, emotional, and sexual) that a child in care may have experienced.
- define physical, emotional, and sexual child abuse and neglect.
- describe factors that contribute to child abuse and neglect.
- identify and describe observable signs and behavioral indicators of child abuse and neglect.

### SESSION II

The caregiver can

- describe potential impacts of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse on the development and behavior of children and youth.

- identify, describe, and demonstrate supportive responses while caring for the needs of children and youth who have experienced abuse or neglect.
- identify, describe, and demonstrate how to support a child who is disclosing an abusive or neglectful experience.

#### TRAINER'S INSTRUCTIONS

- **Honesty:** Be as honest as possible and express yourself as you really think and feel.
- **Respect**
- **Confidentiality:** If using descriptions of children in care and their families, no names or other identifying information are to be used.

## 2. HOW WE MAY RESPOND TO CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

### **Learning Outcome:**

The caregiver can describe the ways in which people, including themselves, may respond to and feel about child abuse and neglect.

### **Materials:**

Handouts

- Handout #5 How We React to Child Abuse

Overheads

- Overhead #5 How We React to Child Abuse

### **Instructions:**

Most adults have witnessed children being abused or neglected by parents. This may involve an experience in their own family, the family of a friend, relative or a neighbor. It may have been in a public place such as a shopping mall. In addition, many caregivers have seen the results of physical abuse (bruises, abrasions) on children in their care.

Violence against children, especially when deliberately carried out by parents, generates intense emotional reactions that may range from sympathy to hostility. Sometimes we may have conflicting emotions, such as feeling both angry and sorry for the offender.

Recognizing and accepting our emotional reactions to child abuse is not by itself sufficient to make us effective helpers to abused children. We must also develop helpful ways to resolve or channel some of these strong reactions. If these emotions are not constructively channeled or controlled, they are likely to affect our:

- objectivity.
- sensitivity to the child.
- perception of the child's family.
- reactions to the child's parents.

### **Exercise:**

The following exercise may provoke very strong personal emotional reactions by participants towards child abuse and

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neglect as well as emotional reactions toward those who are seen as responsible for inflicting the abuse or neglect. Let participants know they need only share those personal reactions they feel comfortable in sharing. It is quite possible that a participant experienced abuse or neglect as a child and has not disclosed this to anyone, or has not processed the effects of such an experience. The trainer should prepare the participants carefully for this activity, including a statement that difficult memories or emotions may be recalled. Participants should share feelings and experiences only to the extent to which they are comfortable.

Write down your responses to the following questions:

When I think about children being abused or neglected I feel...

How might your reactions affect you, as a caregiver, in your ability to interact with:

- a child who has experienced abuse or neglect?
- a family member alleged to have abused or neglected the child?
- other members of the child's family?

To what types of abuse or neglect do you most strongly react?

Why?

What helps you in resolving your feelings?

Points to consider.

Possible harmful effects of reactions include:

- being overprotective of children.
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- responding to children because of your subjective viewpoint of what happened to them rather than responding to how they see what happened to them.
  - upsetting them by your responses. Children often take care of adults' feelings and minimize or deny their own.
  - responding in hostile ways to parents and other family members which might get in the way of your relationship with the child and the child's relationship with family members.

Ways to resolve feelings include:

- discussing concerns with the child's worker.
- debriefing with appropriate resource persons.
- using stress reduction strategies and "time outs."
- implement regular self-care activities.

Source: Dawson, R. (1996). Self Awareness and Child Abuse Ministry for Children and Families: Recognizing Abuse and Neglect Child Protection Training. Victoria, BC Province of British Columbia.

Review Handout #5, "How We React to Child Abuse," to summarize this section.

Three issues seem to impact caregivers. These are:

- Having been abused or neglected themselves or knowing someone who has been abused or neglected. It is important when caring for children and youth to be aware of "your own stuff." Caregivers need to protect their own mental health and, if there are issues, to address them in therapy.
- Being a parent. Caregivers may reflect on their own behaviors as parents and may find themselves questioning the possibility of their own children being abused or neglected.
- In the case of sexual abuse, the ability to talk freely about sexual issues and the caregiver's own feelings about sexuality influence the ability to care for children and youth who have experienced abuse and neglect.

Source: National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect (1999). Substitute Caregivers: Child Abuse and Neglect, <http://www.calib.com>

**Summary Remarks:**

Reactions indicate our humanity and humanness. What is important is that, as caregivers, we are aware of our reactions, acknowledge them, and then respond to them in ways that allow us to be present for the children we care for and about.

**3. SELF-CARE**

**Learning Outcome:**

The caregiver can identify self care strategies when working with children who have experienced abuse and neglect.

**Materials:**

Handouts

- Handout #6 Self Care

**Exercise:**

Just as experiencing abuse and/or neglect affects children and youth, working with children and youth affects caregivers.

Participant think back to the module “Effects of Caregiving” when self care was discussed. The importance of taking care of self was emphasized. Think specifically about the reactions to abuse and neglect that you identified earlier in this session and to jot down in Handout #6, “Self Care,” 2 or 3 things you might do in each area when you are caring for a youngster who has experienced abuse or neglect.

You may want to review the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social dimensions of self care and think of an example for each.

**4. DESCRIBING TYPES OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT**

**Learning Outcome:**

The caregiver can describe types of abuse and neglect (physical, emotional, sexual) that a child in care may have experienced.

**Materials:**

Handouts

- Handout #7 Describing Abuse and Neglect

## TRAINER'S INSTRUCTIONS

- Handout #8 The History of Child Welfare

### **Instructions:**

This section will look at:

- How people describe what behaviors and actions might be abusive and neglectful.
- The history of child welfare.

Most people believe they understand what constitutes abuse and neglect. However, based on our own beliefs, values, and experiences, there may be differences.

### **Exercise:**

- Refer to Handout #7, "Describing Abuse and Neglect."

Please write on a piece of paper what behaviors and actions you consider abusive or neglectful for each of them.

Behaviours and actions vary depending on our own beliefs and values. Historically, definitions of abuse and neglect have changed.

Refer to Handout #8, "The History of Child Welfare." Read it thoroughly. Caregivers need to be aware of the historical context because the values and attitudes that we hold about abuse and neglect are changing. It is essential that caregivers keep informed as they play a key role in providing care for children and youth. The historical perspective helps explain how and why child welfare legislation has changed over the years and has resulted in the current Child, Family and Community Service Act.

As caregivers we have our own beliefs, values, and attitudes about what constitutes abuse and neglect, however, we are obligated to know and to follow the definitions of child abuse and neglect as set out by law and statute.

## 5. DEFINING ABUSE AND NEGLECT

### **Learning Outcome:**

The caregiver can define physical, emotional, and sexual child abuse and neglect.

### **Materials:**

Handouts

- Handout #9 Legislation Concerning Child Abuse and Neglect
- Handout #10 Definitions of Abuse and Neglect
- Handout #11 Shaken Baby Syndrome Background Information
- Handout #12 Failure to Thrive

**Instructions:**

As caregivers, we need to be familiar with legislation that defines child abuse and neglect.

In order to take appropriate action when concerns arise about the safety and well being of children for whom we care, caregivers need to be familiar with the legislation defining child abuse and neglect. The legislation is contained in the Child, Family and Community Service Act, as well as the Criminal Code of Canada. Refer to Handout #9, "Legislation Concerning Child Abuse and Neglect." The handout describes Section 13 of the Child, Family and Community Service Act with which you should be familiar.

Caregivers are governed by Section 13 of the Child, Family and Community Service Act. As such, if we have any reason to believe that a child/youth is currently being or has been abused or neglected, we need to report our concerns to a protection worker and let the worker investigate.

Refer to Handout #10, "Definitions of Abuse and Neglect" and study the definitions. The definitions in the handouts are what caregivers, MCF workers, teachers, and other professionals use in assessing child abuse and neglect. Draw your attention to the section on Shaken Baby Syndrome and Failure to Thrive.

There are two types of abuse and neglect that are receiving increased attention: Shaken Baby Syndrome and Failure to Thrive.

Shaken Baby Syndrome occurs when a young child's head is whiplashed back and forth during shaking. Since an infant's neck muscles are not strong enough to support head movements, the infant's brain can be bruised as it bangs against the skull.

Consequences may include:

- bleeding behind the eyes and in the brain
- seizures
- partial or total blindness
- mental retardation
- death.

Less severe shaking may result in learning and attention problems.

Shaken Baby Syndrome is about losing control. Most shaking is precipitated when a caregiver becomes frustrated when efforts to console an infant who is crying or “colicky” are unsuccessful.

Describe why infants cry.

Reasons may include that the infant is tired, hungry, needs a diaper change, is thirsty, or is not feeling well.

Consider some ways caregivers can help infants feel better when they are crying.

Ideas may include changing a diaper, feeding them, burping them, holding them, rocking them.

Taking a break and getting support so that someone else can care for the infant is important. If an infant has high needs, then the issue of caregiver support should be addressed in the plan of care. Caregivers should ask for help and ensure relief is available if necessary. In an emergency the caregiver should call the resource worker, the supervisor, or other current support line.

Refer to Handout #11, “Shaken Baby Syndrome.”

The term “failure to thrive” is used to describe infants and young children who are not growing as would normally be expected. The failure to grow must be noticeably significant and last for a period of time.

Ask participants to think back to a time when a doctor or nurse weighed and measured an infant or young child of their own or one they were caring for. The weight and height were recorded on a growth chart. A failure to grow is identified when an infant or young child’s weight gain does not keep up with her height gain.

Some cases of failure to thrive result from physical causes including heart and kidney disease. Others result from psychological and social difficulties that result in the infant or young child not getting enough calories needed for weight gain.

Psychological aspects of failure to thrive often centre around the attachment between the child and her mother. The mother seems to be less sensitive to the child's needs, less likely to comfort the child when she is upset, and more likely to insist on fixed feeding schedules. Some researchers suggest that the term non-organic failure to thrive centers on poverty and how it may contribute to an inability to provide a young child with adequate nutrition and nurturance.

- Using the child's guardianship team as a resource is important for the caregiver.
- Avoiding power struggles over feeding is important.
- Comforting the infant during feeding by rocking, singing, etc., provides a nurturing environment.

Refer to Handout #12, "Failure to Thrive."

A video on Shaken Baby Syndrome is available through the Kiwanis Club of Ottawa. Check the reference page (R. Epsom) for details. The Ministry of Children and Family Development will provide a pamphlet to trainers to accompany this module.

**Summary Remarks:**

Caregivers need to know what child abuse and neglect is in order to take appropriate action to ensure the safety and well-being of children placed in their care.

**6. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT**

**Learning Outcome:**

The caregiver can describe factors that contribute to child abuse and neglect.

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**Materials:**

Handouts

- Handout #13 Factors Contributing to Child Abuse and Neglect

Overheads

- Overhead #6 Factors Contributing to Child Abuse and Neglect
- Overhead #7 Ecological Perspective of Child Abuse and Neglect

**Instructions:**

People working with children who have been abused or neglected need to develop a framework to understand the factors that can precipitate child abuse. It is important to understand why some families exhibit abusive behavior while others do not. Child abuse and neglect develops out of a combination of social and economic stresses, parental factors, and child factors. Abuse and neglect do not usually occur in the presence of one factor but is the result of a cluster of factors. The following exercise will help identify these factors.

**Exercise:**

Review Overhead #6, "Factors Contributing to Child Abuse and Neglect."

Take 5 minutes to brainstorm as many factors as you can that may contribute to child abuse and neglect.

**Attitudes and Stresses Which Contribute to Child Abuse and Neglect**

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**1. Cultural Values And Attitudes:**

- Values about children
  - children as property
  - authoritarian parenting
  - perfect children and perfect parents

- Values about violence
  - violence as entertainment
  - problems are solved by force
  - a certain amount of violence against children is acceptable
- Values about freedom
  - the primacy of individual rights
  - the myth of self-sufficiency
  - the price of privacy

**2. Social And Economic Stresses:**

- poverty or financial instability
- unemployment
- social deprivation
- family changes:
  - sickness
  - death
  - separation and divorce
  - job loss
  - frequent moves
  - need for two incomes
- isolation
- too many changes

**3. Child Factors:**

- prenatal factors
  - child unwanted or unplanned
  - pregnancy and/or delivery physically and emotionally difficult
  - problematic prenatal care
- prematurity
- disruptions in attachment
- physical or mental disabilities

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- temperament and behavior challenges

- parent/child mismatch

**4. Parent Factors:**

- parents' experiences in childhood
- inappropriate expectations of children
- role reversal
- personality conflicts
- social competence

These points are expanded on in Handout #13, "Factors Contributing to Child Abuse and Neglect."

**Summary Remarks:**

Refer to Overhead #7, "Ecological Perspective of Child Abuse and Neglect" to explain that child abuse and neglect occurs within the context of a family, neighborhood, community, society, and culture.

There are usually a number of factors that interact with one another to contribute to abuse and neglect. We need to understand that abuse and neglect of children and youth is a very complex issue.

**7. SIGNS AND INDICATORS OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT**

**Learning Outcome:**

The caregiver can identify and describe observable signs and behavioral indicators of child abuse and neglect.

**Materials:**

Handouts

- Handout #14 Recognizing Indicators of Possible Child Abuse or Neglect

**Instructions:**

Sometimes, when children come into care, they may not have been assessed as being abused or neglected. Caregivers might be the first ones to notice something in a child's behavior or physical condition that leads them

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wonder about the possibility that the child has experienced abuse or neglect. Having some idea about signs and indicators is helpful. The BC Handbook for Action on Child Abuse and Neglect summarizes possible signs and indicators. This information is in Handout #14, "Recognizing Indicators of Possible Child Abuse or Neglect."

## TRAINER'S INSTRUCTIONS

Briefly scan the list and note questions concerning anything you are unclear about.

Note that one or two isolated indicators do not necessarily mean a child was abused or neglected. Clusters of indicators are a stronger indication of abuse and neglect. However, it is important for caregivers to report all indicators of abuse and neglect immediately to the child's worker.