The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is committed to safeguarding the well-being of children. A national study of almost 2,000 early childhood professionals—such as yourself—conducted by NAEYC reveals that early childhood educators feel an overwhelming professional and personal responsibility to help prevent child abuse and neglect and are willing to take a more active part in prevention (Olson & Hyson 2003).

NAEYC believes that all early childhood professionals and programs play an important role in helping to prevent maltreatment wherever it occurs—in families, programs, or communities. This responsibility is outlined in the position statement "Prevention of Child Abuse in Early Childhood Programs and the Responsibilities of Early Childhood Professionals to Prevent Child Abuse (NAEYC 1996)."

As the nation’s largest organization of early childhood professionals and others dedicated to improving the quality of early childhood programs, NAEYC is committed to leading these prevention efforts.
Child abuse and neglect can take many forms and have devastating effects on children, families, and communities. The basic definitions of maltreatment are widely accepted, although every state has its own specifics.

### Common Types of Child Abuse and Neglect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ABUSE</th>
<th>PHYSICAL/SEXUAL</th>
<th>EDUCATIONAL</th>
<th>EMOTIONAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Injury to a child due to punching, beating, kicking, shaking, hitting, burning, biting</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Constant criticism, shaming, rejection, ridiculing, or withholding of love, support, and guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Any sexual contact with a child such as fondling of genitals, rape, incest, sodomy, exposure of the child through pornography or exploitation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Patterns that consistently damage a child’s emotional development or sense of worth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEGLECT</td>
<td>Leaving a child home alone</td>
<td>Failure to enroll a child of school age in school</td>
<td>Exposure to any kind of violence in the home</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not providing adequate food, clothing, medical and dental care, or shelter</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not changing diaper or cleaning a child</td>
<td>Not attending to a childís special educational needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not getting medical attention or seeking health care when needed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not supervising a childís activities</td>
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</table>

The goal of prevention is simple: stop child abuse and neglect from happening in the first place. The best way we can accomplish this is to support families and provide them with the skills and resources they need to understand and meet their child’s emotional, physical, and developmental needs (Prevent Child Abuse America 2003).

About 60 percent of young children regularly attend some type of early childhood program (U.S. Department of Education 1995). We early childhood educators are invaluable to those children’s families. Because of our unique role in the lives of children and families, we play a key part in preventing—not just reporting—child abuse and neglect and promoting healthy social and emotional development. As teachers, we are well positioned to support families through our professional knowledge, skill, and commitment. Every day our work helps reduce children’s risk of abuse and neglect by supporting and strengthening families.

**PREVENTING child abuse and neglect**

We help support and strengthen families in our work when we

- provide quality care and education through developmentally appropriate practices
- develop reciprocal relationships with families
- recognize situations that may place children at risk of abuse, and signs of abuse, and provide families with appropriate support
- understand, and help families to understand and handle, children’s challenging behaviors
- build on child and family strengths
- inform ourselves about our professional responsibilities.

These are all key in reducing the risk of child abuse and neglect.

**Scope of the Problem**

- Nearly three million reports concerning five million children were filed in 2000, and about one million children were confirmed victims of abuse or neglect.
- Boys and girls are equally likely to experience neglect and physical abuse. Girls are four times more likely to experience sexual abuse.
- Children of all races and ethnicities experience child abuse.
- Children of all ages experience abuse, but the youngest children are most vulnerable.
- Most abuse happens within families. (DHHS 2003)
We can help reduce the risk of child abuse by using six prevention strategies in our work with children and their families:

1. Provide quality care and education through developmentally appropriate practices.
2. Develop reciprocal relationships with families.
3. Recognize situations that may place children at risk of abuse, and signs of abuse, and provide families with appropriate support.
4. Understand, and help families to understand and handle, children’s challenging behaviors.
5. Build on child and family strengths.
6. Inform ourselves about our professional responsibilities.

Provide quality care and education through developmentally appropriate practices. When we help children develop in a high-quality, family-focused program, we are already powerfully involved in preventing harm to children. Developmentally appropriate practices—teaching practices connected to young children’s characteristics as individuals, as developing people, and as members of families, cultures, and communities; and practices that provide all children with a challenging and achievable education—are a cornerstone of NAEYC values and philosophy. Quality care and education strengthens families, promotes healthy social and emotional development, and prepares children for later school success.

In practice

- Network, read, and keep up-to-date on early childhood practice through NAEYC conferences and resources and other professional development opportunities.
- Talk and share ideas with other educators, and participate in program staff development activities that reinforce high-quality, challenging, and achievable educational practices.
- Use knowledge about each child’s strengths and challenges when planning activities.
- Place posters, images, and key resources about developmentally appropriate practices in the classroom or program as reminders for families and staff.
Develop reciprocal relationships with families. A reciprocal relationship between a teacher and a family is mutually respectful, cooperative, and collaborative, with regular and frequent communication about the child (NAEYC 1996). The younger the child, the more closely the child is tied to the family, and the more programs must rely on families to help them understand the child. Thus, teacher-family relationships are critically important in early childhood programs.

Strong, reciprocal relationships are key to minimizing the potential for child abuse and neglect. By having such a relationship in place, we can more effectively respond to signs of family stress and provide appropriate information and/or referrals to community services. When we communicate with families about difficult topics—such as children’s challenging behaviors or possible problems at home—provide critical support.

Talking about certain issues can be extremely uncomfortable for both educators and parents. Communication is much easier when a supportive, reciprocal relationship is already in place.

High-quality programs go even further in building a strong coalition. They bolster families’ social networks by encouraging active parent involvement through a variety of developmentally appropriate practices and program policies.

Talking with Families: Words that Help

ï “Let’s figure this out together.”
ï “How can we help?”
ï “It seems like you’re having a tough time.”
ï “There are other parents here in the same situation as your family. Here are some things they have tried...”

In practice

ï Maintain regular, ongoing contact with families through informal chats at drop-off and pick-up times, daily or weekly notes, regular parent conferences, home visits, e-mail, or phone calls.
ï Encourage families to talk about their culture and family traditions, their child’s strengths and challenges, their hopes and dreams for their child.
ï Ask families about how they think their children are developing.
ï Plan and invite families (including extended family members) to program activities they can get involved in, such as workshops, potlucks, field trips, or parties.
ï Ask families on a regular basis what kind of support they need.
Recognize situations that might place children at risk of abuse, and signs of abuse, and provide families with appropriate support. We should be familiar with the risks and signs of abuse and neglect (see box) and must report suspected abuse and neglect in accordance with state regulations. In assessing possible neglect—failure to provide for a child’s basic needs—we should recognize that a failure to provide basic necessities may be related to poverty, or that cultural differences may lead to misinterpretation of a family’s childrearing practices.

We also should be able to recognize situations that may directly or indirectly place children at risk. We can address some risk factors directly. Children are at risk if their parents lack understanding of child development and knowledge of age-appropriate disciplinary methods or knowledge of children’s health, hygiene, and nutritional needs (Family Support Network 2002). We are well positioned to help families in a respectful and supportive way to handle these issues. When we share our knowledge of child development, positive guidance, basic needs, and more, we help strengthen families.

Poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental illness also are risk factors. Some early childhood programs have professionals on staff who are trained to handle these challenges and can access an array of child and family services; but most programs are not able to offer specialized early intervention services. Families’ access to health care, housing, income support, and other social services may help protect children from abuse and neglect, so we should become familiar with resources in our community and provide information and referrals whenever appropriate.

Recognize the Risk Factors

- Ongoing environmental stress, such as poverty, financial troubles, or difficulties with relationships
- Social isolation and lack of outside support for the family
- A family’s lack of knowledge about child development and child rearing
- Alcohol or substance abuse in the family
- Family mental health issues—for example, depression or anxiety
- Children’s persistently aggressive or challenging behaviors
- The challenge of caring for a child with physical, cognitive, or emotional disabilities or chronic or serious illness

(Family Support Network 2002)

In practice

- Become familiar with the risks and signs of child abuse and neglect.
- Pay attention to children with sudden behavioral changes or who display aggressive behaviors, and work with their families and others to identify possible causes.
- Learn more about children with disabilities, developmental delays, and special needs—and about the challenges their families may face.
- Create a clothing closet with commonly needed items (like hats, mittens, coats) or a food pantry with non-perishable items and tactfully encourage the use of these resources.
- Work with your program to develop and distribute a list of local resources that may be helpful to families.
Handling challenging behaviors

Understand and help families to understand and handle childrenís challenging behaviors. Childrenís challenging behaviors—from occasional hitting and biting to prolonged tantrums or extreme aggression—push adults’ buttons, tax their resources, and place children at risk for abuse and neglect.

The wide range of behaviors, from those easily and effectively addressed to those that are persistent and unresponsive to commonly used guidance strategies, make handling challenging behaviors one of the hardest aspects of our job. Just imagine how difficult this is for parents or other family members, especially when the family may be under other stress.

Some challenging behaviors may indicate an underlying disability or physical, cognitive, or emotional problem. A specialist can identify any possible issues and work with the child and family to address them early on.

In everyday contact with families, we should take the opportunity to provide information and insight on appropriate expectations for their child’s behavior and suggest nonviolent discipline techniques. We can work with parents to develop a consistent home-school approach to addressing the behaviors. Children and families can benefit from our enhanced skills in this area.

In practice

- Predictable and consistent routines and schedules help prevent challenging behaviors. Post schedules so children know what to expect and feel secure and comfortable (Ostrosky et al. 2002).
- Share with families information about young children’s development and appropriate behaviors and expectations at various ages and for individual children. Prepare periodic handouts, organize workshops, or have NAEYC brochures available for parents (see Resources).
- Talk with families about how to handle challenging behaviors at home and offer appropriate suggestions.
- Provide an observation space where parents can observe their child interacting with others and learn new guidance techniques from watching staff.
- Recommend specific actions and words families can use when facing challenging behaviors (for example, ignore tantrums if the child is not hurting herself or others; tell a child who is hitting, “Use your words—do not hit”).
Build on child and family strengths. All children and their families have strengths, and as educators we naturally build on these assets. We help protect children from harm when we promote children’s social and emotional development and identify and foster children’s strengths. Good peer relationships, coping skills, self-esteem, social skills, and internal locus of control are all strengths that help protect children and we can help build them and help parents to recognize them in their child. It is important to remember that as supportive, competent adults, we serve as role models, helping both children and parents (Family Support Network 2002).

In practice

1. Praise the things you admire in the family and child: “You all have been having a rough time lately; I really admire the way you are coping.” “Robert’s curiosity about everything is so wonderful—you must be doing a great job of encouraging him at home.”
2. Use informative, specific words when acknowledging children’s strengths. “You used some bright colors on that picture—it is better than just ‘Good job’ or ‘Pretty picture.’
3. Ask parents about their child’s strengths and special interests so you can build on them if you are not already doing so.
6. Staying informed

Inform yourself about your professional responsibilities. NAEYC’s position statement Prevention of Child Abuse in Early Childhood Programs and the Responsibilities of Early Childhood Professionals to Prevent Child Abuse (1996) and other important NAEYC resources (including accreditation criteria, standards for professional preparation, the profession’s code of ethics, and Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs) all define early childhood educators’ legal and ethical responsibilities regarding child protection. They also underscore the importance of reciprocal relationships with families in both quality early childhood programs and individual educators’ core competencies. Some publications are listed in the Resources here, but other resources are available at www.naeyc.org.

In practice

- Learn your responsibilities as an educator in preventing and reporting child abuse.
- Know your state and local child protection laws and share them with families in a natural, nonthreatening way as part of your program’s policies.
- Regularly attend workshops and conferences, such as NAEYC’s Annual Conference and National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development, to stay up-to-date on professional responsibilities and ethics.

As early childhood educators, we are mandated by law to report suspicions of child abuse or neglect wherever it occurs—on families, programs, or the community. Reporting suspected abuse can protect the child and secure help for the family. Contact your local child protective services (CPS) or law enforcement agency so other professionals can assess the situation.

For more information about where and how to file a report, talk to your program administrator or call Childhelp USA®, National Child Abuse Hotline (800-4-A-CHILD®). The Childhelp hotline is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by professional crisis counselors who have access to a database of emergency, social service, and support resources.
Stay involved and help more children

Every day, without a doubt, our work helps prevent child abuse and neglect. But we can take an even more active part in preventing child maltreatment. We can further our commitment to children and families by taking advantage of the following opportunities.

Join the nationís largest professional association of early childhood educators. As a member of NAEYC, you receive numerous benefits and opportunities to work with colleagues with similar commitment and concerns through Interest Forums, Affiliates, and more. NAEYC membership information is available online at www.naeyc.org/membership.

Become a champion for children and their families. NAEYC encourages advocacy for high-quality care and education and adequate, effective community support services. The organization also encourages the early childhood community to speak out against community and domestic violence and child abuse and neglect. Go online to NAEYCís Childrenís Champions at www.naeyc.org/childrens_champions to learn more about federal and state policies and legislation, sign up to receive Action Alerts on important issues, communicate with members of Congress or the media, and more. State or local NAEYC Affiliates provide other advocacy opportunities in your community.

Take charge of your own professional development. The more we know about child development, family relationships, challenging behaviors, healthy social and emotional development, violence prevention, and the complexities of child abuse and neglect, the more we can share our knowledge and use our skills with families and children to protect children from harm and promote healthy development. Regularly visit www.naeyc.org for information about NAEYCís Annual Conference, National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development, and Affiliate-sponsored conferences; ACT Against Violence, an early childhood violence prevention program; and many other professional development opportunities and resources.

Share this information with colleagues. Use this brochure to identify and acknowledge the ways you and your colleagues help to prevent child abuse and neglect every day. Discuss what else you can do to prevent abuse and neglect. How can we help one another use our professional knowledge and skills to support families and children?

We make a difference in the lives of children every day. Letís use these ideas and resources to enable us to do even more to promote childrenís healthy social and emotional development and prevent child abuse and neglect.
Resources

The following print and video resources can help you prevent child abuse and neglect by promoting healthy social and emotional development, developing reciprocal relationships with families, handling challenging behaviors, and more. They and other relevant resources are available from NAEYC’s online catalog at www.naeyc.org.

ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Make a Difference: Report Child Abuse and Neglect, video, by NAEYC. 1996. Various professionals discuss what to do if abuse is suspected, the indicators of abuse/neglect, and the impact on society.

PROMOTING HEALTHY SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Secure Relationships: Nurturing Infant-Toddler Attachment in Early Care Settings, brochure, by Alice Honig. 2002. For healthy adjustment, infants and toddlers need secure attachments to adults who provide loving, responsive, and consistent care. Sound advice for both caregivers and parents.


Ready for Life, video, by KERA, Dallas, TX, 2000. Evocative documentary that follows the lives of six children and their families. Illustrates how to build the strength and confidence to face life’s challenges in emotionally healthy ways.

RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES

Off to School: A Parent’s-Eye View of the Kindergarten Year, book, by Irene Hannigan. 1996. A day-to-day glimpse by a mother into a wonderful classroom. Demonstrates teacher-family communication at its best.

Family-Friendly Communication for Early Childhood Programs, book, eds. Deborah Diffily and Kathy Morrison. 1996. Offers 93 brief messages for families on topics ranging from biting to developing children’s literacy. Adapt them for newsletters, family packets, parent-teacher conferences, bulletin boards, or parent handouts. Includes dozens of innovative strategies for bringing parents onboard your program.

Cultivating Roots at Home/School Partnerships, video, by NAEYC. 1996. Learn ways to foster partnerships between families and schools, including through communication, support, learning, teaching one another, child advocacy, and decision making.

CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS/BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT


Practical Ideas for Addressing Challenging Behaviors, book, eds. Susan Sandall and Michaele Ostrosky. 1999. Chapters cover such topics as classroom environmental influences on children’s behavior and working with parents to address challenging behaviors at home.

Discipline: Appropriate Guidance of Young Children, video, by NAEYC. 1988. Positive guidance toward healthy social and emotional development is key in a good early childhood program. Learn how to handle the difficult situations—rushing, not taking turns, temper tantrums—that inevitably arise among preschoolers.


References


For more than 75 years NAEYC has been leading efforts to promote high-quality early care and education for all children from birth through age eight. This brochure is part of Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families, an initiative to expand NAEYC’s efforts to help early childhood professionals and families prevent child abuse and neglect and achieve the best possible social and emotional outcomes for all children. For more information about Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families, child abuse prevention resources and materials, and NAEYC, go to www.naeyc.org/profdev/support_teachers/default.asp.

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