

MAINTAINING A POSITIVE PARENT-CLIENT RELATIONSHIP WHEN CHILD ABUSE IS SUSPECTED

It may be difficult for those working with children to also work with and be supportive of individuals who have abused these children. Staff/caregivers have strong feelings about the children in their care, and it may be difficult to set these feelings aside, understanding and accepting all those involved. Problems associated with child abuse and family violence may be complicated, and the limits of one's role should be considered. However, there are a number of effective strategies to maintain a supportive relationship with families.

Proactive Steps

- inform parents/staff/caregivers/students of agency policies & procedures re:
 - reporting suspicions of child abuse and family violence
 - contacting parents when there is a suspicion of abuse
 - medical emergencies where abuse is suspected
 - parents/caregivers who appear under the influence of alcohol/drugs
 - late pick-up

- listen empathetically and show understanding of parents' stress, frustration, exhaustion and anger – use every opportunity to teach stress management and calming techniques

- if reporting a suspicion, speak to a child protection worker about:
 - release of your name
 - release of the agency name
 - notifying a parent of the report
 - appropriateness of self-reporting
 - any concerns of past or anticipated anger/violence
 - being a partner in helping the child and family

After a Report

- if challenged by a parent on why a report was made:
 - remind the parent of the agency policy that you are legally bound to report to a child protection agency
 - state you did not have a choice – you could be charged and fined for failing to report
 - reinforce that you are instructed to call a child protection agency, even before calling the family, and a child protection worker informs you about who contacts the family and when
 - talk about concerns for the child – try not to use trigger words like abuse, neglect, family (domestic) violence
 - explain that you are not trained to determine whether or not abuse has occurred, but to cooperate with authorities to help them assess the situation
 - reinforce that you are not judging them – you are there to help
 - be aware that the parent may not be the alleged abuser, and may be in shock that his/her child may have been abused
 - understand that the parent may have a lot of unanswered questions about how? why? where? and who?
 - help parents to understand that a child is never to be blamed for the abuse or report (e.g., avoid statements like “You’ll never be the same again!”)
 - explain that children cannot be expected to protect themselves (e.g., do not say things like “How could you let him do those things to you?” or “Why didn’t you tell us before?”)
- If confronted by an angry person, suggest that s/he takes some time to calm down. Do not attempt to have any further discussion until the person is calm. If necessary, ensure your own safety. Do not put yourself between angry out-of-control people.
- If threatened or faced with a violent person, or if safety is an issue, call for police assistance.
- If an allegation has been made against a staff member/student/volunteer, parents may need reassurance on how the agency plans to provide a safe environment for children.

Ongoing Strategies

- be aware of your role – you cannot be expected to “fix everything”
- accept the qualities described of the abuser and non-offending parent (e.g., do not make comments like “How can you say those things about ...?” or “That horrible person has ruined you forever.”)
- be a nonjudgmental listener with no agenda of your own
- remember that everyone involved has rights and a point of view that is to be respected
- be sensitive to a parent’s devastation that s/he could not protect the child or missed the signs of abuse
- offer ways you can help:
 - extend an open invitation to come and learn about child development, expectations, guiding children’s behaviour, children’s needs, basic care and safety
 - have reading material available and to lend
- direct parents to appropriate community supports
- draw on a family’s existing supports (e.g., extended family and friends)
- help parents to understand the impact of abuse/family violence on children
- express ongoing concern for everyone’s well-being and need for support
- advise parents to contact a child protection agency or police with any concerns, suspicions, or questions
- be honest – only make promises/commitments that you can keep
- keep confidences the parent or child may share, as long as these are not detrimental to the child and/or the child abuse investigation
- do not confront parents or the alleged abuser
- do not try to convince a victim to leave an abusive partner – offer support no matter what the decision.

- be aware of your own reaction and how you are coping, especially if:
 - the abuse was extreme
 - the child has been further mistreated
 - the suspicion was a mistake or could not be verified
 - the child has been removed from the setting and taken into care
 - your own memories surface
- speak to your supervisor if your own emotions are interfering with the ability to cope with a family where abuse is a factor
- use the “healing messages”