

PREVENTATIVE STEPS WHEN CARING FOR CHILDREN IN YOUR HOME

When you are caring for other children in your home, there are many issues to think about. Some of these are connected to the fear of being accused of child abuse. Several of these issues are presented below, with preventative steps to consider. There is no guarantee that following these steps will prevent an accusation. However, caregivers who try these preventative steps are less likely to leave themselves open to accusations of child abuse.

Issue: Should I leave the children in the care of anyone other than myself (for example, other family members, a student volunteer, neighbour)

Preventative Steps:

- Discuss with parents how they feel about another person being with their children.
- Before ever leaving children with others, come to an agreement as to who else can care for them. You and the parents should sign an agreement on what has been decided. Keep one copy for yourself and give one copy to the family.
- If you work with an agency, check the policies as to leaving children in the care of others. If there is a signed agreement between yourself and the parents, give a copy of any signed agreements to your supervisor.
- Never leave children unsupervised, “pop out” for a few minutes or leave the children to be watched by anyone else, unless there is a signed agreement with parents (and agency, if applicable).
- It is recommended that children are never left alone with anyone under 18 years of age.

Issue: What should I do if in my home there are magazines, videos/DVDs or access to computer material that are not suitable for young children?

Preventative Steps:

- Store and keep any materials unsuitable for children in an area where children do not have access. For added safety, put these items out of sight and out of reach to visitors in the home.
- If children are allowed to play on the computer, be aware of what they are doing at all times.
- Never keep magazines, videos or computer discs that are against the law (for example, child pornography).

Issue: What should I do if a parent wants to leave an ill child in my care?

Preventative Steps:

- If you work with an agency, check that the health policies give you clear guidelines around accepting children who are ill. If you do not work with an agency, but have a signed agreement with parents, include your policy on accepting ill children. You cannot tell the cause of the illness or what may happen during the day (for example, vomiting and dizziness could be a sign of head injury, and the child may get worse while in your care).
- If you are caring for a mildly ill child, tell a parent at the end of the day if the symptoms of illness are getting worse.

Issue: What should I do if I notice marks, bruises or other injuries on a child?

Preventative Steps:

- If you suspect child abuse, immediately call a child protection agency. Be sure to tell the worker if you think the child needs medical attention right away.
- Record all the indicators (see Information Package #4). Even if you do not suspect child abuse, it is important to keep a record of any marks, bruises or injuries on a child.
- Do not tell a parent about your concerns unless a child protection worker has said it is OK to do so.

Issue: What should I do if I feel I am losing my patience with the children?

Preventative Steps:

- Understand why children misbehave, what children do that bothers you and how to guide their behaviour in positive ways. (See Information Package #2.)
- Be aware of how you relate to the children – make an effort to change any high-risk caregiver behaviours. (See Information Package #3.)
- List what other things are happening in your life that are causing stress and affecting your work with the children. Seek help and advice to deal with stressful situations.
- If you work with an agency, call your supervisor for help.

Issue: What if the children in my care see or hear things going on in my home that are not healthy for children (for example, family violence, physical punishment of my own children by other family members, weapons, teens under the influence of alcohol or drugs)?

Preventative Steps:

- If you work with an agency, talk about the problem with your supervisor.
- Seek help in areas such as marriage counseling, family relationships, crisis management, coping with adolescents and parenting skills.
- Take a break from looking after other people's children until the problem is solved. Continuing to provide care at this time may be putting the children at risk.

Issue: The children in my care are friends and neighbours in my community – how do I balance friendship with being professional?

Preventative Steps:

- Before you accept a child into care, discuss with parents your role and what can be expected of you. Make them aware that part of your job is reporting any suspicions of child abuse.
- Sign a contract with each family that outlines the roles and responsibilities of yourself and the parents.
- Be consistent. Do not make exceptions for some parents because they are your good friends, but not for others. This would include following the policies set out by your agency, for example:
 - keeping a child overnight as a favour
 - getting involved in a custody battle
 - releasing a child to a parent/caregiver who you suspect is under the influence of alcohol or drugs
 - thinking you can help the family yourself instead of reporting suspicions of child abuse to a child protection agency
- Be consistent. Do not make exceptions for some parents because they are your If you work with an agency, speak to your supervisor if you are unsure of the way your relationship with a family is going.

Involve yourself in activities that keep you up to date on information and issues related to child abuse and family violence, as well as child development, guiding children's behaviour and communicating with families. The more information you have, the better equipped you are to address concerns and to help children and families.

