

# Suggested Practices for Journalists Reporting on Child Abuse and Neglect

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control  
Division of Violence Prevention





# Introduction

News reports on cases of child abuse and neglect can play an important role in educating the public and policy makers about the systemic causes of child maltreatment and ways to prevent it. This guide was developed to explain how journalists can impact prevention by expanding the focus of stories about physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect of children to include information on the causes of the problem and ways to prevent it. Journalists can provide comprehensive coverage that highlights prevention approaches and promotes safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for all children and families.

Often, news coverage about child abuse and neglect focuses on the shocking and brutal results of individual cases of abuse—a perspective that can reinforce misperceptions that “bad parenting” or a failure of child protective services is the main cause of child maltreatment.<sup>1,2</sup> Journalists can help audiences understand that child abuse and neglect is not simply the result of individual failures or family dynamics, but a public health issue that affects communities and society in significant ways. By working with prevention researchers, practitioners, and other experts, journalists can craft news stories about child maltreatment that convey not only the problem but also possible solutions.

Preventing child maltreatment requires individuals and communities to work together to insure that no child is ever abused or neglected. Stories that highlight steps anyone can take to provide safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments for children will be more helpful for prevention than focusing on the response after violence has occurred.

Child abuse and neglect is a significant public health problem in the United States. According to reports from state Child Protective Service (CPS) agencies, 702,000 children were found to be victims of maltreatment in 2014. Another 1,580 children died from child maltreatment that year. In these CPS cases, Children 3 years old and under were at greatest risk, and the majority of cases involved neglect.<sup>3</sup> Statistics tell only part of the story because many cases are never reported to social service agencies or the police. Estimates from self-report data indicate that more than 1 in 7 children have experienced one or more forms of child abuse or neglect in the past year.<sup>4</sup>

## Terms to Know

There are four commonly recognized types of child abuse:

- **Physical abuse** is the use of intentional physical force, such as hitting, kicking, shaking, burning, or other show of force against a child.
- **Sexual abuse** involves engaging a child in sexual acts. It includes fondling, rape, and exposing a child to other sexual activities.
- **Emotional abuse** refers to behaviors that harm a child's self-worth or emotional well-being. Examples include name calling, shaming, rejection, withholding love, and threatening.
- **Neglect** is the failure to meet a child's basic needs. These needs include housing, food, clothing, education, and access to medical care.
- **Child Maltreatment** is a term often used by scientists and prevention specialists to include all types of abuse and neglect of a child under age 18 by a parent, caregiver, or other person in a custodial role.

For more detailed definitions, see [http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/cm\\_surveillance-a.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/cm_surveillance-a.pdf).

# Suggestions for Journalists

## 1. Examine the factors that contribute to child abuse and neglect and explain the impact on children, families, and communities.

Stories that focus strictly on isolated incidents of child maltreatment usually don't leave room to discuss prevention. Journalists can widen the lens on child abuse and neglect by telling stories that extend beyond the details of a specific case to examine the broader context of child maltreatment and emphasize opportunities for prevention.

- Explore community and societal factors that contribute to child abuse and neglect such as poverty, unemployment, lack of social support for parents, and violence in the community.<sup>5</sup>
- Examine family stressors that make it harder for parents to provide safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments, such as alcohol and drug abuse, violence within the family, a parental history of abuse during childhood, and a lack of parenting skills.<sup>5</sup>
- Look at data from local, state, and national child death review teams on the number of children that have died from abuse or neglect and highlight their recommended prevention strategies such as home visitation, parenting programs, and connecting families to community resources.
- Work with child abuse prevention organizations to find story angles that help audiences understand the serious, life-long consequences of child maltreatment and illustrate how prevention approaches can help.
- News stories should include information on rates of abuse and common circumstances of child maltreatment in the county or state to increase awareness of the problem. This information can be supplemented with examples of programs and strategies that help parents provide safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments. For more information on prevention strategies that work see page 7.



### Reliable Sources for Data on Child Abuse and Neglect

#### **CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control**

<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/index.html>

#### **Administration on Children and Families**

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/child-maltreatment>

#### **CDC's National Center for Health Statistics**

<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/child-health.htm>

#### **Child Welfare Information Gateway**

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/>

#### **The Forum on Child and Family Statistics**

<http://www.childstats.gov/>

#### **Annie E. Casey's Kids Count**

<http://www.kidscount.org>

#### **Child Trends Data Bank**

<http://www.childtrends.org/databank>

#### **National Center for the Review and Prevention of Child Deaths**

[www.childdeathreview.org](http://www.childdeathreview.org)





## 2. Explore the long-term consequences of failing to prevent child abuse and neglect.

Journalists are in a position to ask important questions about the long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect and emphasize the importance of prevention. The consequences of abuse and neglect reach far beyond the individual child and family to affect the entire community and society as a whole.

- Talk with child abuse prevention experts about the dangerous effects of toxic stress on early brain development. When a child experiences child maltreatment over a long period of time, the body's stress response system is activated for an extended period. The resulting toxic stress can cause changes to the developing brain, leading to long-term problems with learning, behavior, and physical and mental health.<sup>6</sup>
- Examine the lifelong health consequences of adverse childhood experiences such as child maltreatment. Children who are abused or neglected are at higher risk for health problems as adults. These health consequences include alcoholism, depression, drug abuse, eating disorders, obesity, high-risk sexual behaviors, smoking, suicide, and certain chronic diseases.<sup>7,8</sup>
- Explore the economic toll child abuse and neglect exerts on the community and society through costs related to child welfare, physical and mental health, special education, and the legal system. A recent CDC study found the total lifetime estimated financial costs associated with just one year of confirmed cases of child maltreatment is approximately \$124 billion.<sup>9</sup>

### Questions to Ask Local Experts:

- Why is it so important to prevent child abuse and neglect?
- How can child abuse and neglect affect lifelong health?
- What are the economic costs to our community?
- What is the latest research on the long-term effects of abuse and neglect?
- What are other communities doing to prevent child abuse and neglect?
- What are local agencies doing to prevent abuse and neglect?
- What resources are available to help parents and caregivers provide safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for children?
- What else could be done to prevent child abuse and neglect in our community?
- What is the link between child abuse and neglect and other forms of violence?

### 3. Focus on prevention strategies that work.

Researchers, practitioners, and community-based organizations are good resources for examples of prevention strategies that work. State health departments, school officials, or medical professionals may also be able to suggest prevention strategies and provide information on community trends and local prevention efforts. By including information on prevention strategies that work, reporters can expand the focus of news stories to include potential solutions for the problem of child abuse and neglect.



- Highlight the best available evidence for prevention approaches. Many communities have a range of programs to support parents and caregivers. However, by focusing on strategies that have been rigorously tested in research trials, journalists can increase the chance that their stories will lead parents to programs that can actually make a difference in their lives.
- Use real examples from the community to illustrate how prevention strategies can help. For example, a National Public Radio (NPR) series from March 2015, *What Shapes Health?*, explores social and environmental factors that affect health and well-being throughout life. This information is being used to raise awareness about ways to prevent child abuse and neglect. One segment focuses on Philadelphia medical clinics that support parents in breaking generational cycles of trauma and abuse so kids get a better chance to grow up healthy. Other segments focus on how substandard housing, low incomes, and workplace policies impact future health problems and parents' ability to provide safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for their children.

#### 4. Protect children and avoid causing additional harm to victims and families.

Journalists have an important role in providing the public with information about cases of child abuse and neglect in the community. However, these stories should be reported in ways that protect the identities of the victims and provide a broader context for why abuse occurs and how it can be prevented.

- Protect the confidentiality of children who are victims of abuse and neglect. Even if a victim or parents agree to be identified, they may not fully understand the ramifications of their decision. Often the potential for harm to the child and family far outweighs any potential benefit to the story.<sup>11</sup>
- Use state and federal public-disclosure laws to obtain information. Redacted documents from police or child-welfare agencies can be invaluable for providing context and background for the story without revealing the identities of the victim and family.<sup>11</sup>
- Be aware of the responsibilities and sensitivities involved in interviewing children who have experienced maltreatment. Interviewing child victims is inadvisable and should rarely happen. Protecting victims from additional harm should take precedence over getting a good quote.

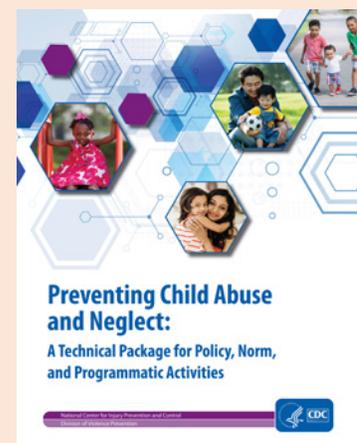
## Prevention Strategies for Child Abuse and Neglect

CDC's [technical package for preventing child abuse and neglect](#) identifies a number of strategies to help states and communities prioritize prevention activities based on the best available evidence. These strategies include:

- Strengthening economic supports for families
- Changing social norms to support parents and positive parenting
- Providing quality care and education early in life
- Enhancing parenting skills to promote healthy child development
- Intervening to lessen harms and prevent future risk<sup>10</sup>

The technical package includes strategies with a focus on preventing child abuse and neglect from happening in the first place as well as approaches to lessen the immediate and long-term harms of child maltreatment. These strategies range from a focus on individuals, families, and relationships to broader community and societal change.

More information on prevention strategies for child abuse and neglect is available at <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/prevention.html>.





## Tips for Interviewing Children

While it is inadvisable and potentially harmful to interview children who have experienced abuse and neglect, the following tips are important to keep in mind in the **rare** instances when interviews with children occur:

- Seek informed consent from a parent or guardian before interviewing or photographing a child. That means explaining to the adult and child why you want to talk with them and how the interview will be used.
- Make it clear that you are a journalist reporting the news. Do not act like a friend.
- Find a quiet place for the interview and do what you can to put the child at ease.
- When the interview is over, clear all the quotes you think you will use with an adult who is responsible for the child's well-being.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. Use language carefully when you report on child sexual abuse.

News reports about child abuse and neglect can unintentionally cause further harm to victims, particularly in child sexual abuse cases. Journalists should avoid reporting details about what happened with language that might imply the victim's behavior somehow caused or contributed to the crime. By carefully choosing their words, reporters can tell a compelling story without minimizing the criminal aspects of abuse.

- Seek advice from prevention specialists on the best terms to describe sexual abuse in a neutral and exact way. Resist using sensationalist language or phrases that imply consent such as “affair” or “sex scandal.” Rape or sexual assault should never be framed as “sex.”
- Use language about sexual abuse that is specific and accurate and doesn't convey unintended meaning. [The Judicial Language Project](#) maintains a running list of problematic language used during sexual assault cases and provides an alternative list of more appropriate terms and phrases.

## Conclusion

Journalists have a powerful role in reporting on cases of child abuse and neglect. By expanding the focus beyond individual victims and families, reporters can broaden news coverage and explore the causes of the problem and ways to prevent it. Working with practitioners, organizations, researchers, and editors, journalists can tell stories that paint a more accurate and comprehensive picture of child maltreatment in all its forms and highlight the prevention strategies needed to promote safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments for all children.

When children and their families have access to safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments, individuals and communities flourish. For more information on promoting safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments and preventing child abuse and neglect, visit CDC's Essentials for Childhood Web site at: <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/childmaltreatment/essentials/index.html>.



# Checklist for Reporting on Child Abuse and Neglect

## 1. Examine the factors that contribute to child abuse and neglect and explain the impact on children, families, and communities.

- Explore community and societal factors that contribute to child abuse and neglect.
- Examine family stressors that make it harder for parents to provide safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments.
- Review data and recommended prevention strategies from local, state, and national child death review teams.
- Identify story angles that illustrate the serious, life-long consequences of child abuse and neglect.

## 2. Explore the long-term consequences of failing to prevent child abuse and neglect.

- Talk with child abuse prevention experts about the dangerous effects of toxic stress on early brain development.
- Examine the lifelong health consequences of adverse childhood experiences such as child abuse and neglect.
- Explore the economic toll child abuse and neglect exerts on the community and society.

## 3. Focus on prevention strategies that work.

- Highlight the best available evidence for prevention approaches.
- Use real examples from the community to illustrate how prevention strategies can help.

## 4. Protect children and avoid causing additional harm to victims and families.

- Protect the confidentiality of children who are victims of abuse and neglect.
- Use state and federal public-disclosure laws to obtain information.
- Be aware of the responsibilities and sensitivities involved in interviewing children.

## 5. Use language carefully when you report on child sexual abuse.

- Seek advice from prevention specialists on the best terms to use.
- Use language about sexual abuse that is specific and accurate.

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