

Childhood Abuse and Neglect

FOSTER PARENT COLLEGE A Viewer Guide

Part 1 of 3: Knowledge

Objectives:

- To learn definitions of abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse
- To learn characteristics of maltreating families
- To understand the continuum of parenting

Introduction

Host Sarada Thomas welcomes viewers and explains that this course on understanding child maltreatment is for individuals who want to become foster parents. She goes on to explain that nationwide, there are an estimated 900,000 cases of documented child maltreatment every year. Anyone considering becoming a foster parent needs to have an understanding of child maltreatment, since the great majority of children coming into foster care today have experienced some form of it. In some instances the children have experienced both physical and sexual abuse, and in almost all cases there has been some underlying neglect as well. This course will focus mainly on two of the three forms of maltreatment: physical abuse and neglect. Sexual abuse will be covered in a separate course in this series.



Sarada

Handouts for this course can be downloaded and printed through a link on your personal home page. The handouts contain general information that may be slightly different from local regulations covering you as a foster parent. Please inquire with child protective services in your state for more information. This course contains slides to help illustrate the difference between accidental injuries and abuse. Some of the slides are graphic and might be difficult to view, especially for viewers who may have been victims of abuse. If you feel you might have a problem viewing the slides, stop the program immediately and contact your agency.

What is child maltreatment? What are abuse, neglect, and sexual exploitation?

Betsy Keefer Smalley, LSW, is the Director of Permanency Planning at the Institute for Human Services (IHS) in Columbus, Ohio. She joins Sarada to answer these important questions. Betsy is an expert in foster parent training and conducts research, and develops foster parent training, material.

Sarada comments that many foster parents will care for children who have experienced child maltreatment of one kind or another, and asks Betsy to elaborate on what maltreatment means. Betsy explains that there are three common forms of child maltreatment: physical abuse, neglect, and/or sexual abuse. Even though they are different from each other, they often occur side-by-side in the same home.

Betsy explains that child abuse and neglect are defined by federal and state laws. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) is federal legislation that provides minimum standards that states must incorporate in their statutory definitions of child abuse and neglect. It is up to state and local governments to protect children from abuse and neglect within their jurisdictions.

Definitions

Physical Abuse – Physical abuse is generally defined as “any non-accidental physical injury to the child” and may consist of hitting, kicking, shaking, scalding, burning, or even biting the infant, child, or youth. There are mandatory rules requiring professionals and others who work with children to report suspicious injuries to the appropriate authorities. The handout *Child Maltreatment* contains information on classic definitions of physical abuse.



Neglect – Neglect usually involves the failure on the part of the parent to provide food, shelter, adequate clothing, or sometimes medical care, or even mental health treatment, for their child. It can include a failure to keep the child safe by proper supervision. In some cases, neglect can consist of educational neglect, that is, the failure to provide for the child’s education, which is required by law. These cases are often referred by neighbors, family members, strangers, or schools. Again there is information on this in the handout *Child Maltreatment*.

Sexual Abuse – Sexual abuse will be covered in a future course, but a brief definition is appropriate. Sexual abuse and/or sexual exploitation are considered to be child maltreatment. In some locations, the definition of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation is general, but in many jurisdictions specific acts are identified. The specifics often include such things as inappropriate sexual contact, sexual intercourse, or coercing a child to watch pornography. A useful definition of child sexual abuse is any sexual contact with a child for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator. When sexual exploitation is added to the definition of sexual abuse it usually involves prostituting the child or filming the child for the purposes of making pornography. These cases are discovered through self-reporting, child reporting, and law enforcement.

Child Maltreatment – Sarada asks about the nature and definition of child maltreatment. Betsy explains that laws against child maltreatment vary widely depending on location. But, it is typical to include physical abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse as forms of maltreatment. Some areas also include psychological or emotional abuse: controlling the child through fear, humiliation, intimidation, coercion, etc. In some instances child maltreatment laws include parental substance abuse because it exposes children to a drug environment. Exposing a child to a drug environment can refer to three issues:

- prenatal (in the womb) exposure to illicit drugs or other substances
- parents who are considered to be impaired in their ability to adequately care for their children
- parents who are caught selling, using, or running a drug lab in the home where their children live

In the case of a drug user or a drug manufacturer, the presence of toxic and perhaps explosive chemicals is considered not only hazardous, and endangering to children, but also abusive. Also, selling or furnishing drugs or liquor to children may be considered a form of child maltreatment.

Sarada comments on the magnitude of the issue of parental drug abuse. Betsy says that among other things, substance abuse can compromise a parent's thinking, judgment, common sense, choices, and attentiveness. Parents who are seriously affected by alcohol or illegal drugs often are unaware of the needs of their children, failing to purchase food, clothing, and other necessities. Additionally, parents who are using drugs often exhibit poor control, get involved in criminal activities, and may act abusively or sexually toward the children.

Sarada asks if abuse, neglect, and sexual exploitation are separate problems. Betsy says that while they are different forms of child maltreatment they are not necessarily separate problems. In many instances families can display one, two, or all three forms, with neglect being the most common thread in many maltreating families.

Foster Care Team – Sarada expresses hope that future foster parents haven't been frightened away by this frank discussion of abuse and neglect. She asks Betsy to explain the "foster care team." Betsy offers reassurance that foster parents are not alone; they are part of a team that surrounds the life of a foster child and is there to support the child and the foster family. The team might vary from one situation to another but can include, for example, the child's caseworker, mental health counselor, doctor or psychiatrist, school teacher, speech therapist, or occupational therapist.

Characteristics of Maltreating Parents and Families

Sarada asks Betsy to describe any common characteristics of maltreating parents and families as well as circumstances or situations that cause child maltreatment.

Betsy responds that there is no single known cause of child maltreatment, nor is there any single description or circumstance that identifies a family in which children are victims of abuse and neglect. Child maltreatment can occur in many different situations and is not tied to the family's socioeconomic status, religion, culture, race, or ethnicity.

While there are no specific family characteristics that cause a parent or anyone to abuse or neglect a child, research has pointed to a number of characteristics that are usually associated with maltreatment. These characteristics may be present among families where maltreatment occurs, however, it does not mean that their presence will always result in child abuse and neglect. Families exist that have all these characteristics and never maltreat their children. The characteristics that may cause maltreatment in one family may not have the same effect in another family. For example, researchers sometimes note the relationship between poverty and maltreatment, yet most people living in poverty do not harm their children. Professionals who deal with cases of child maltreatment understand there are multiple and complex characteristics or causes.



The following statements will help viewers understand the characteristics of maltreating parents or families.

Relationship to Victim – Children are typically abused physically by someone they know. Around 9 out of 10 children maltreated were abused by their biological parents; less than 1 in 20 was abused by a stepparent.

History of Abuse – Parents who have physically abused their children commonly report that they themselves had been abused, neglected, or sexually abused as children. However, it does not follow that everyone who was abused as a child will inevitably become an abuser.

Stress in the Family – In a large number of homes where spousal abuse is occurring, child abuse or other maltreatment also exists. In some instances, children are neglected by a parent who is dealing with a fearsome mate. While stress plays a big part in family functioning, exactly how it increases the chances of child abuse is not known. In fact, whether abusive parents actually encounter more stress or whether they simply have a harder time dealing with stressors is unknown.

Lack of Information – Many maltreating parents lack information about, and an understanding of, normal child development. They don't understand what to expect from a child at a certain age. In addition, they may lack positive parenting skills and not know how to raise healthy children.

Substance Abuse – While parental substance abuse can contribute to physical abuse, multiple factors may be responsible. From 1/3 to 2/3 of maltreatment cases are associated with parental substance abuse. In one study, youngsters whose parent(s) abused substances were three times more likely to be abused and four times more likely to be neglected by their parent(s) (Child Welfare). Sometimes it is impossible to isolate substance abuse or any other single factor or characteristic as the cause of child maltreatment. This is further complicated when a family is dealing with multiple problems such as poverty, mental illness, domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, or other medical issues, along with substance abuse.

Inappropriate Expectations – Some research has suggested that some abusive mothers had expectations that were too high for their children and that their attitudes or expectations for their children were more negative than with non-abusive parents.

Numbers of Children – There is some evidence to suggest that neglected children come from families where there are more children and/or a larger number of individuals living in the home or apartment. The environment that results may be more chaotic and changing.

Negative Parenting – Parents who are involved in child maltreatment often fail to attend to or reward their child's good behavior, yet react to any bad behavior from the child. Overall, maltreating parents show their children less affection, fewer positive responses, less playfulness, and less frequent emotional support. Maltreating mothers tend to punish their children harshly and may employ striking or isolating their children for prolonged periods of time. They are less likely to use kinder-gentler approaches with their children, such as explanations and encouragement of the child's successes.

Poverty – Poverty and unemployment may be related to child maltreatment, especially child neglect. Studies have found that children from families with low incomes were more likely to be maltreated as compared to higher income families. Nonetheless, most poor parents do not abuse or neglect their children. But, along with other risk factors such as mental health problems, drug or alcohol abuse, isolation, and lack of positive social and family supports, poverty can add to the chances of maltreatment.

Child Component – Children themselves can be a factor in their own abuse. Of course, children and teenagers are not to blame for the maltreatment they receive, but certain characteristics can place them at higher risk of being abused or neglected. Little children, for example, are vulnerable to specific kinds of maltreatment such as failure to thrive or shaken baby syndrome. Children with disabilities may be more susceptible and are more likely to be maltreated. In addition, children who have difficult temperaments, behavior problems, and chronic illnesses may be at higher risk of being abused, especially if their parents cannot cope with the increased demands and challenges.

Please refer to the handout *Factors in Abuse and Neglect* for a written summary of the common risk factors for maltreatment.

The Continuum of Parenting

Parenting, like any human behavior, falls on a continuum; it ranges from very positive to very poor; from healthy to unhealthy; from very good to very bad in terms of expectations, decision making, etc. Many parents occasionally yell at their children, for example. That's normal, even if it is not always something they are proud of. However, if the parent screams obscenities, name-calls, or verbally abuses the child that is almost certainly abnormal, poor, unhealthy and even emotionally abusive parenting. Therein lays the continuum.

Child maltreatment is often a collection of poor decision-making behaviors. That is not to say a responsible parent might not make the same decision in an isolated situation. For example, a parent sees (through a window) an older child running toward a dangerous situation and temporarily leaves her baby alone in the crib to rescue the older child. That action is probably not only excusable but necessary. A snap decision had to be made. However, a parent who decides to take a vacation for a few days and leaves her four-year-old home alone has made more than a poor decision; she has committed abandonment.



As stated earlier, while there are common characteristics or risk factors related to maltreatment, there is no single personality type or set of personality characteristics that identifies who will become a maltreating parent. Like parenting, maltreatment falls on a continuum:

- Maltreatment ranges from severe to borderline. Severe cases are easy to distinguish, but there are gray areas that merge with fairly common parenting practices.
- Types of maltreatment intermix with each other. Abuse, sexual exploitation, and neglect can be interrelated and coexist.
- Maltreatment can wax and wane. Abuse may occur when parents are using drugs but not exist when they are in remission.
- Maltreating parents may be only intermittently maltreating, especially when it comes to physical abuse. Between episodes of abuse, they may be decent enough parents. While physical abuse is often intermittent, child neglect tends to be chronic.

Parent Expectation Exercise

Read the statements and decide if the parent's expectation is appropriate or inappropriate. Answers include Betsy's feedback.

1. Parents expect a three-year-old child to keep his bedroom picked up at all times.
(Answer: Inappropriate. It's unrealistic to expect a three-year-old child to have the maturity and/or motivation to pick up his or her bedroom. At this stage the child should be consumed with interest in play, not work. For that matter, it may be unrealistic and unnecessary to expect a child of any age to keep his or her bedroom clean and picked up at all times.)
2. Parents expect a ten-year-old to do simple weekly chores, such as putting dirty dishes in the dishwasher.
(Answer: Appropriate. By the age of ten, the average child can handle basic chores if given proper encouragement and sometimes incentives. It wouldn't be unnatural for a child of ten to complain about having to do this, but a parent can persuade the child in positive ways to enlist his cooperation and contribution.)
3. A mother seeks advice from her eight-year-old child about her problems with her abusive boyfriend.
(Answer: Inappropriate. While a parent may need to keep children informed about how things are going in the home, whether there is a pending separation or divorce, for example, it is inappropriate for a parent to seek advice from the young child or teen. That prematurely puts the child in an adult role.)
4. A father asks his eleven-year-old son whether he has any questions about sex.
(Answer: Appropriate. By eleven, and even earlier, a child should be receiving information from his parents about the birds and the bees. Many times asking a child if he has questions about this touchy subject produces little. However, a more productive approach may be to occasionally introduce discussions and comments about sexuality as the subject appears at home and in the world around us, for example on media such as TV, radio, music videos, iPods, the internet, billboards, etc.)

Parent Decision Exercise

Most parents feel that it is important for children to behave. Please read the statement and choose if the parent's decisions (or actions) regarding the child's behavior is Normal, Abnormal (or Improper) parenting.

1. A child argues back with her mother about household rules. The mother refused to talk to her teen-aged daughter for a week.
(Answer: Abnormal. While parents may typically take a breather from a heated disagreement with their children, giving them a week's "silent treatment" as a form of punishment or extortion is emotionally abusive. It also strays from the goal of keeping open channels of communication with children. This strategy employs withdrawal of support and affection in a way that can harm a child's sense of security.)
2. A son is caught drinking and driving while using the family car. The father grounds the sixteen-year-old for two months.
(Answer: Normal. Actually, many parents might ground a teenager for a period longer than two months. The authorities, if they've cited the youth for a DUI, would take away his driver's license for a year.)
3. A three-year-old has a bad day and poops in her underwear. The father rubs his daughter's nose in her underwear.
(Answer: Abnormal. This approach employs an unacceptably crude, degrading method of dealing with a child's behavior.)
4. A ten-year-old "uses his words" to describe why he does not think it's fair to go to bed early on a week-end night; the mother listens and agrees.
(Answer: Normal. Although many parents might not favor any form of back-talk whatsoever, it can be an excellent parenting approach to seek input from children in household decisions, whenever possible. Teaching children to explain their point of view and their interests in ways that are effective and persuasive can be a positive parenting approach.)

In closing, Betsy emphasizes that parents who maltreat usually don't enter parenthood or start each day intent on hurting their children. Most abuse occurs in response to risk factors. While this is not an excuse for those who abuse or neglect their children, it is true to say that many parents could maltreat their children, given the wrong set of circumstances. She acknowledges two revelations that have come to her over the years, especially after becoming a parent herself:

- how it is possible for any parent to abuse
- how tragic it is when abuse occurs

Sarada thanks Betsy for the straight answers on maltreatment. The course will continue with a look at how foster parents can develop empathy for birth parents based on an understanding of their history and circumstances.

Part 2 of 3: Empathy

Objectives:

- To promote a sense of empathy among prospective parents toward birth parents based on history
- To understand that maltreating parents were themselves typically maltreated as children
- To recognize predisposing attitudes and behaviors in a maltreating family, and how they become generalized from one generation to the next



Introduction

The focus of part 2 of this class is the relationship between the foster parents and the birthparents. For foster parents, the most natural tendency is to protect the children in their care. People who work with abused children might wonder “what kind of person could do this to their own child?” or might hear others making judgment calls about an abusive parent. These thoughts can become a “we-they” scenario; we, the foster parents are good; they, the abusive parents are bad.

Unfortunately, that thinking is not good for the child, nor does it help the situation. Betsy Keefer Smalley explains that 75% of foster children will eventually be reunited with their birth parents. Most children, deep down inside, beyond wishing things were different, love and will defend their birth parents. When foster children hear negative talk, it only confuses the situation for them. Caregivers need to recognize the child’s point of view toward his birth parents. Preferably, the foster family and others don’t criticize the birth parents, especially around the children.

Host Sarada Thomas wonders if it isn’t difficult for the foster parents to understand how the birth parents could have maltreated their children. Betsy says it can be very difficult; she has found that most individuals are drawn to becoming foster parents because they want to help unfortunate children. Many prospective foster parents don’t automatically think, “I want to help a child get back to his birth family.” It’s important to re-emphasize that foster parents are part of a team. They may need help and support in how to work with the team to prepare foster children to return home when that is the safe, court-approved goal.

When Sarada asks how birth parents view foster parents, Betsy comments that birthparents have gone through court hearings, have had their children taken away, and feel guilty about the situation. They often see foster parents as a part of the system that has imposed itself on them and they don’t trust foster parents.

Unless foster parents develop a positive and honest relationship with birth parents, the child will suffer. Foster parents are going to interact with birth parents during visitation or other circumstances. It is much better for everyone when the foster parent has a good attitude toward the birth parents and builds trust with them – even in those situations when children are not going to live with their birth parents. Whatever the case, the child will still need to work through their feelings and come to grips with the reality of their loss, and their loyalty to both birth parents and resource parents. It helps when foster parents have empathy for the birth parents.

If foster parents have problems or questions about the birth parent's interactions with the child then they should feel very free to turn to the appropriate team member. The team members should be able to answer any questions that arise and also provide the foster parent with guidance, suggestions, or reassurance on how to handle situations that have or may come up.

Empathy

For foster parents, empathy means knowing emotionally what the birth parents' are experiencing from their point of view. It is important to understand the birth parents' perspective. In the case of an abusive parent, often the abuse was part of the parent's history, too.

When Sarada asks if foster parents should forgive abusive parents because their family history is the cause of abuse, Betsy explains that while history may not be an excuse for maltreating children, it can help foster parents empathize with birth parents as to why they abused. According to researchers, up to 70% of abusive parents were maltreated when they were children.

While people who were abused as children do not automatically grow up to abuse their own children, it is considered to be a risk factor. It is possible for maltreatment to be passed down from one generation to the next. Research has pointed out that one-third of abused children grow up to become poor, neglecting, or abusive parents themselves. Another third can, and do, avoid that pattern. The final third are on the fence and can be tipped either way depending on how vulnerable they are to stress. Obviously this last third has the chance to end the abuse with some good behavior modeling.

Shared parenting may be one of the most important concepts to keep in mind as a foster parent. Since the majority of foster children return home to their parents, it behooves the foster parents to develop an understanding of the birth parents' situation for the benefit of the children, the birth parents, and themselves.

The following exercise will help viewers practice understanding empathy. Viewers are asked to note how each generation of the family in this case experienced an abusive history. The story is told by Nikki, daughter of Demitri; Alex, son of Nikki; and, Sophie, daughter of Alex.

Empathy Exercise

First Generation: Demetri

Nikki (as a child): “My dad, Demetri, was a tyrant, and my mom never got in his way. I’m number 4 of 6 kids. My dad was from the old country – Greece. He worked hard as a janitor and ruled the family with an iron hand. On Friday nights after being paid, he would hit the bottle of ouzo. If we were too noisy, he said to mom, ‘Children should be seen and not heard,’ and yell at us to ‘shut up.’ I thought we were being quiet, but later in the evening he would say to mom, ‘You don’t do nothin’ with these kids; you spare the rod and spoil them!’ Once my brother asked him, ‘Why?’ and he beat him even harder with the switch. I remember his favorite saying, ‘I like to leave marks ‘cause it will remind them to behave. I don’t care if they have to suffer to learn. I had to suffer as a kid.’ “



Question and Answer: Focus on Demetri

Read the statements and decide which attitudes or behaviors Demetri showed by answering True or False. Please refer to the handout *Factors in Abuse and Neglect* to help you with your answers. Answers include Betsy’s feedback.

1. Demetri has inappropriate expectations.
(Answer: True. Demetri adopted the attitude that children should be seen and not heard. When children are behaving as children, they can be quite noisy, and it’s unrealistic to think that they should always be subdued and quiet.)
2. Demetri shows lack of empathy.
(Answer: True. Demetri said he didn’t care if the children suffered, since he had suffered.)
3. Demetri’s parenting behavior includes corporal punishment.
(Answer: True. Corporal punishment, often involving hitting the children with objects, has been Demetri’s parenting behavior pattern.)
4. This story about Demetri demonstrates a parent-child role reversal.
(Answer: False. Demetri had a minimal relationship with his kids; he basically felt children should be children - seen and not heard.)

Second Generation: Nikki

Alex: “I don’t know what went wrong with my mom, Nikki. I don’t want to be like my Mom, even though I love her. I was kind of the scapegoat. It was my beatings that got us in trouble with the courts. Mom mostly raised us alone. She was married three times and always had boyfriends around. She said Grandpa Demetri was hard on her and she didn’t want to use the ‘rod’ like he did. She tried to be so nice to us at times and not discipline us. She was ‘sick’ a lot with ‘woman’ problems, so us kids took care of her at times. We didn’t have any rules and when we got to be too much for her, or when she was having boyfriend trouble, she would start drinking or using. That was when CSD stepped in because she’d explode and start swinging and hitting us. Usually she hit us with anything she could get her hands on.



When she cooled down, she felt bad. She’d actually apologize to us and cry and want us to talk about our feelings. When CSD took us from her, she started drinking and losing control of her anger.”

Question and Answer: Focus on Nikki

Read the statements and decide which attitudes or behaviors Nikki demonstrated by answering True or False. Please refer to the handout *Factors in Abuse and Neglect* as needed to help you with your answers. Answers include Betsy’s feedback.

1. Nikki has inappropriate expectations.
(Answer: True. Nikki adopted the attitude that children should be seen and not heard even though they were wild, in part, because she failed to provide limits.)
2. Nikki shows lack of empathy.
(Answer: False. Nikki wanted to hear from her children how they felt after she abused them.)
3. Nikki’s parenting behavior includes corporal punishment.
(Answer: True. When the kids got to be too much for her and when she was using, she’d hit them with anything she could get her hands on.)
4. This story about Nikki demonstrates a parent-child role reversal.
(Answer: True. This clearly took place when Alex and his siblings ministered to their mother when she was sick and expected her children to take care of her.)

Third Generation: Focus on Alex

Sophie: “Now that I am in therapy, I’m working on why my dad, Alex, is so abusive to us. I think he is a good dad in some ways, but when things go wrong, his temper gets away from him. He really had mixed feelings when Grandma Nikki died of liver disease. He said she was loving to him but he never could tell what was coming next, a hug or a beating. So with us he went the other direction completely. He demanded order and cleanliness and rules. He gave us the rules, and we needed to obey and comply. ‘No back-talk. Just do it, when I tell you to.’ He had the attitude that children should be seen and not heard. He just expected us to understand, even though he really didn’t listen to or understand us.



Now I know my dad was not a happy man. When he came home drunk, we didn’t know if he’d pass out or beat mom and us kids. My dad would give me the belt at those times. He said the marks would be a good reminder to me. I told my therapist that when I was drinking I’d lose it and yell at my son, but I hear my dad screaming at me. It haunted me, so I tried to stop drinking. And, I try to just spank the kids. I don’t want to totally beat them. I vowed I’d never take a belt to them. But I admit when I fall off the wagon and drink again, I can lose it with the kids. That’s when I left some marks on them, and I guess that is why my kids were taken from me.”

Question and Answer: Focus on Alex

Read the statements and decide which attitudes or behaviors Alex showed by answering True or False. Please refer to the handout *Factors in Abuse and Neglect* as needed to help you with your answers. Answers include Betsy’s feedback.

1. Alex has inappropriate expectations.
(Answer: True. Alex demanded extreme compliance, obedience, and cleanliness from his children.)
2. Alex shows lack of empathy.
(Answer: False. Alex did not understand his children. He didn’t even try.)
3. Alex’s parenting behavior includes corporal punishment.
(Answer: True. Alex thought that leaving marks would be a good reminder of what the child had done wrong.)
4. This story about Alex demonstrates a parent-child role reversal.
(Answer: False. He simply expected the kids to behave, obey, and comply; he developed minimal closeness to them.)

Betsy states this exercise demonstrates that Demitri's family resorted to corporal punishment over the years. The family carries a pattern of abuse that will trickle down to influence future generations. Hopefully, the abusive family patterns can be broken. Often foster caregivers witness families that are victims of generational abuse.

Empathic Responses Exercise

Viewers are asked to imagine themselves as foster parents of Sophie's three children from the previous exercise. You and Sophie have sat down together and talked a few times. From the conversations, you realize Sophie has had a tough life, and learn that she was a foster child herself. She got pregnant at 14 and never finished her high school education. Recently drugs and alcohol have been a big problem for her. Sophie's children have been in and out of care. The last time they were taken away was after her drunken boyfriend beat her and her children. As a result, her boyfriend went to jail, and she began a relationship with his drinking buddy.

During a visitation with her two children, Sophie becomes emotional and confides in you "The courts won't ever give me my kids back. I'm trying, but they don't like me or my new boyfriend. And, they make me take all these parenting courses I don't even understand."

Later, in a team meeting, you are asked about your opinion of Sophie. What would you say? Following are several possible answers reflecting a variety of opinions with responses from Betsy.

- **Opinion #1:** This woman is totally concerned about herself, drugs, and her boyfriends; and, she hits her kids. I don't think she can straighten up. *This is judgmental and is a critical way of describing Sophie to team members. The statement doesn't demonstrate empathy since it fails to consider such things as family history. It is a premature assumption that Sophie can't better herself and improve her parenting.*
- **Opinion #2:** This poor woman, she sure has had a rough life. I really pity her. I feel bad for her. *This describes Sophie only by emphasizing the speaker's pity for her. Pity alone won't help the team understand Sophie.*
- **Opinion #3:** I can see why Sophie struggles so much in her life, after all she has been through. I know it will be difficult as she makes the needed changes in her life. *This opinion shows empathy. The speaker has put himself in another person's shoes to understand what she is facing.*

Empathy Based on Knowledge of Circumstances

History, or past experiences, can certainly be a huge factor in how individuals parent their children and how likely they are to maltreat. History plays a part in determining whether a parent might abuse his child. Current risk factors in the parent's day-to-day life can impact whether the parent might be more likely to maltreat his or her child. Factors such as the lack of helpful resources, living in poverty, isolation, and a lack of a social network can add to the likelihood that the parents might abuse or neglect their children. Betsy identifies factors related specifically to children, such as disabilities, or serious emotional or behavioral problems, that can be very taxing and push a family to abuse or neglect. This is not blaming the child for his own maltreatment, nor is it justification for abusing a child. These factors are considered "present circumstances and predicaments" facing the family.



Empathy Exercise: Knowledge of Present Circumstances and Predicaments

Viewers are asked to put themselves in the shoes of a single parent of three children, ages 3, 4, and 6. You work 40 hours a week and your net pay is \$450 per week. Your elderly aunt cares for the children while you work, but she is in poor health and is very susceptible to illness. Your youngest child has been sick with a cold, fever, and nasty cough for five days. She is lethargic and doesn't appear to be improving. This week your rent is due, you need to buy food, and must use cash, since your food stamps ran out several days ago. You also must put gas in your car to get to work every day next week. You are worried about leaving the children with your aunt, because the last time she got sick, she developed pneumonia and spent two weeks in the hospital. However, if you miss work, you will lose pay. Finally, your child should go to the doctor. In order for Medicaid to pay you will need to miss a day of work and sit at the clinic or you can pay cash to see the doctor up the street who will see you in an hour.

What would you do in this situation? Following are several possible options with responses from Betsy.

- **Option #1:** Leave the children with your aunt and hope she doesn't get sick herself. Go back to work (without taking time off) so you will have money for food and rent. Medical care for your sick child will have to wait. *Your child's health might be at risk and you might be faulted for medical neglect of your child. This might not be a good option, try another.*
- **Option #2:** Get your 9-year-old niece to stay with the children, and tell her to call you at work if anything happens. Your niece will have to stay home from school to care for the children. *It is inappropriate and perhaps illegal to leave your children in the care of a nine-year-old. Not only might the children be at risk, they could be taken away by the authorities. This might not be a good option, try another.*
- **Option #3:** Stay home from work and care for your children yourself to prevent your aunt from getting sick. Go to the clinic and let Medicaid pay the bill. Lose several days of income; either food or rent will have to wait. *This is a difficult decision because you may lose not only several days of income, but also your job. This might not be a good option, try another.*
- **Option #4:** Take your child to the doctor and pay cash. Don't worry about the rent until next

pay day. Hope your landlord does not continue with the eviction process as he said he would if you were late one more time. *This might be a choice. Remember, if you fail to pay your rent, you may find yourself and your children homeless and on the street. This might not be a good option, try another.*

As this exercise demonstrates, sometimes no good choice exists for parents given their circumstances. Parents, especially when they are poor, or the working poor, are often forced to choose options which could be view by others as neglectful.

This brings an end to the empathy segment of this course. Part three continues with recognition and reporting child abuse and neglect.

Part 3 of 3: Recognition and Reporting

Objectives:

- To increase lay recognition of the different indicators, signs, and effects of abuse and neglect
- To learn when to report suspected abuse
- To learn about getting baseline medical examinations
- To review required roles and responsibilities of caregivers
- To underscore the importance of reporting abuse
- To identify mandated reporters



The focus of part 3 of this course is the recognition of some of the signs of physical abuse. Betsy Keefer Smalley wants future foster parents to understand that they might discover signs of maltreatment on a newly arrived child or when the child returns from birth parent visits. It is also possible for foster children to be abused, or just plain injured, by other children in your home or in school. In most states it is mandatory for foster parents to report abuse concerns to their agency.

The following slide show presentation will help viewers recognize some signs of abuse and how to tell them apart from accidental injury. Some of the slides are graphic and might be difficult to view, especially for individuals who have been victims of abuse. Class participants who might have a problem viewing the slides are instructed to stop this course immediately and contact their agency.

Host Sarada Thomas comments on the horrible marks left by abuse and wants to know if all foster parents will encounter these types of injuries on their future children. While Betsy acknowledges they will not necessarily see such abuse, she says that viewing abuse can be one of the challenges of being a foster parent. All future foster parents need to be prepared and understand how to spot marks of abuse.

Most of the slides just viewed focus on physical abuse. These are very disturbing images, but there are signs of neglect that parents should be aware of. Betsy refers viewers to handouts which list and explain signs of neglect and additional signs of physical abuse. It is important to note that the existence of one sign or symptom alone may not conclusively indicate that the child is being abused. Generally, if these symptoms show up time and again, or if they appear together, the level of suspicion should prompt foster parents to consider the likelihood of abuse. These suspicions should be reported to the authorities.

Reporting Incidents

The laws, regulations, and procedures covering mandatory foster parent reporting of abuse suspicions vary from state to state. In general, foster parents clearly must report any observed or suspected child maltreatment to law enforcement or to the child protection unit and/or to their caseworker. It is important to know the legal statutes in your state and the child's custodial state about mandatory reporting of child abuse.

While laws differ from state to state, every state has "mandatory reporters" of child maltreatment. The reporters can vary, but usually include professionals who work with children such as school teachers, doctors, nurses, clergy, social workers, and mental health workers. Often the list of mandatory reporters extends to others, such as child care workers and foster parents. In some states, any and all adults with suspicions about child maltreatment have a duty to report.



In their role as mandatory reporters, foster parents need to report an event if they:

- have reasons to believe the child in their care has been abused or neglected
- witness a situation that can result in injury to a child or is related to abusive or neglectful parenting

Also, foster parents need to work with their team members who are involved with the birth parents and be sure they are aware of any concerns or observations. Foster parents are not expected to be experts or investigators of child abuse and neglect; that is the responsibility of the team members.

Specifically, abuse needs to be reported as soon as possible. Some states may have a 24-hour-or-less requirement for telling child protection caseworkers or the Department of Human Services about observations or concerns. There may be additional guidelines for making a written statement as well. Foster parent caseworkers can provide specific local reporting requirements.

If a child is in immediate danger of abuse and needs protection right away, foster parents should immediately contact law enforcement (the police or sheriff's department) by calling 911.

Most state laws require that foster parents, as child care workers, have a duty to report if they have reasonable belief that a child has been abused or neglected. That does not mean the foster parents have to prove the abuse; the proof of abuse is left to law enforcement and the courts. The ultimate responsibility for the child rests in the courts. It is the court's decision to accept the permanency placement plan suggested for the child. The foster parents and team members have the responsibility to assist the team with implementation of the permanency plan, whether it involves reunification with the birth parents or adoption.

Heightened Risk for Abuse While in Foster Care

Sarada brings up the difficult subject of foster parents abusing or neglecting their own foster children. Betsy acknowledges that it is very unfortunate and demoralizing to other foster parents who read of abuse in foster care. No one simple answer exists as to why this happens. Foster children are at heightened risk of abuse in a foster home due to a variety of reasons. Referring back to an earlier section of this course, Betsy reminds viewers of the child component risk factor related to maltreatment.

- Foster children can have emotional and behavioral problems which are extremely difficult for foster parents to manage. These children may not respond to typical parenting approaches. When this happens, foster parents can become very frustrated and highly stressed. This is why continual training is so important, as is using the support of the team available to the foster family and foster child.
- Foster children may actually invite reenactment of their past abusive treatment, as sad as that may sound. A child may actually seek to be spanked or struck, for example. The foster parents need to know how to respond to this type of provocative behavior.
- Some foster children may not be used to parents telling them how to behave. A parent who actually cares about providing rules and structure can be very new to a child. As a result, a child may get into a pattern of defiance which can spiral into a battle of wills.
- Other reasons children may be at increased risk of abuse while in foster care include cultural differences that may be confusing and inappropriate expectations on the part of the child and foster family.
- Some foster families themselves are at high risk for abusing or neglecting a child. They were approved to be foster parents, but should not have been.

- On some occasions, foster parents may have been matched with a child whom they are not suited to care for. Some foster parents might do well with an infant or young child, but they don't function well with teenagers. Some foster parents might be just fine with a child who is fairly untroubled and well-behaved, but are beyond their skill level with a child who is seriously troubled.

The best way to keep foster parents from abusing is for them to work closely with their team.

- First, a parent needs to have the ability to discuss problems with other team members. Some individuals might be reluctant to acknowledge or admit they feel overwhelmed by their foster child; perhaps the parents feel they are failing in some way. Foster parents need to know that is not the case. It is essential for foster parents to let others know they feel increasingly frustrated, exhausted, or beyond their capacity to deal with the child.
- Second, it is important for parents to take advantage of the training opportunities provided by the agency and others.
- Third, parents need respite (time away from the children) to have a break and relax. Clearly, if problems move dangerously toward abuse, parents need to remove themselves from the situation before it reaches abuse.

Child Component

Risk Factor Exercise

In the following exercise, potential foster parents are asked to rank the following behaviors shown by children or adolescents in foster care from highest to lowest in terms of how disturbing or exhausting they might be for foster parents to deal with.

- A ten-year-old boy misses the toilet and urinates on the bathroom floor on an almost daily basis.
- A fourteen-year-old girl questions why she can't wear a top that exposes her midriff.
- A six-year-old boy is a buzz saw of activity and has to be told repeatedly to clean his room because, in his words, "he forgot."
- A fifteen-year-old boy has no interests outside the family and is content to hang out by his foster mother all day and night. He asks meaningless, repetitious questions, and seems clingy.
- An eleven-year-old girl argues with everything anyone says.

Betsy explains that there is no right or wrong response. The exercise is designed to help potential foster parents understand that there are child behaviors some foster parents would find acceptable but that others would find unacceptable. Ideally, on the route to becoming foster parents, individuals will think about and discuss what behaviors they could handle in their home and what behaviors they could not.

The topic of abuse is not an easy one, but potential foster parents need to be informed and knowledgeable about the subject of abuse, because sometimes placements don't work out. That isn't a failure unless it becomes abusive.

This brings an end to the third and final section of this course on child abuse and neglect. In brief summary, this course has covered:

Part One

- facts and figures on child maltreatment
- the three major types of maltreatment: abuse, neglect and sexual abuse
- the roles of the team members

Part Two

- history and risks that relate to child maltreatment
- understanding and empathizing with birth parents whose children come into your foster home

Part Three

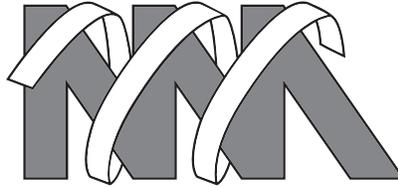
- how to recognize certain signs and indicators of abuse
- when and how to report suspicions or observations of abuse to the authorities.

Sarada thanks Betsy for her assistance with this course who states, "It has been my pleasure. I am so excited when caring individuals begin their journey to help foster children. I feel privileged to pass on information to new, prospective foster parents. I hope we have provided a balanced introduction to the tough subject of child abuse. We certainly don't want to scare parents away with our talk about child maltreatment or needlessly alarm anyone about the challenges of raising children who have been abused earlier in life. At the same time, information can hopefully help our new foster parents raise and care for children safely in their homes."

Sarada closes the course with thanks to the viewers who took this course at Foster Parent College and with a wish for the best of luck for foster parents in their efforts to help foster children.

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