

Protecting Yourself from False Allegations

Allegations of child sexual abuse are a very serious matter. When caring for a child who has been sexually abused, foster parents must take extra precautions to protect themselves against false allegations. These precautions protect not only the foster child but all members of the household.

Protecting against false allegations does not imply that foster parents should refrain from loving or showing affection to their foster child.

Foster children who have been sexually abused have been traumatized by their experiences. They may make false allegations for many reasons, including:

- Escaping a placement
- Keeping their foster family at a distance
- Getting attention
- Reliving earlier abusive episodes
- Being hypersensitive to “triggers” or things that remind them of prior abuse
- Misinterpreting the foster family’s words or actions as threats against their safety
- Suffering from a mental disorder which may or may not be related to previous abuse

Even before a child who has been sexually abused enters the home, foster parents can take steps to protect themselves and their families against false allegations of child sexual abuse. The following strategies should be employed before and during your care of a child who has been sexually abused.

Before Placement

- **Be honest with yourself, your family, and your caseworker** if you do not feel up to the challenge of caring for a child who has been sexually abused. These children require special care that not every family is equipped to provide. It is better to be honest up front than to risk exposing your family to a nerve-racking investigation.
- **Take courses on caring for children who have been sexually abused.** Agencies often require this of families who are taking on a child who has been sexually abused. If not, make sure you learn as much as possible about the special needs of these children. Taking a course on “defensive parenting,” which focuses on how to keep everyone safe from false allegations, will help caregivers protect all members of the household.
- **Ask your caseworker about the child’s history**, including previous abusive situations and abuse allegations. This may help you identify patterns in the child’s behavior or recognize triggers that may remind him or her of prior abuse. This history may be helpful in the event of an investigation.
- **Give foster children who have been sexually abused their own bedrooms.** They should not share a bed with other children or their foster parents. Their boundaries have been violated in the past by abuse, so re-establishing those boundaries is part of the healing process for these children.



- **Establish firm safety rules regarding dress, touching, and privacy.** All family members, even birth children, must agree to follow these rules. Discuss these rules with your caseworker before putting them in place. (See the House Safety Rules handout in this course for more information.)

During Placement

- **Try not to leave the foster child alone with any member of the family.** This includes other foster children, birth children, or grandchildren. This is especially true of family members who are the same gender as any previous abusers, as this can trigger the foster child to relive the abuse or perceive abuse where there is none. When the foster child must be alone with another family member, keep a log of the events during that time.
- **Ask the foster child's permission before moving into his personal space.** "Moving into personal space" can include hugging, cuddling, touching the child's arm or shoulder, or other seemingly simple acts of intimacy. Children who have been sexually abused must relearn how to own their personal space and they may misinterpret your actions. Find other ways to show affection to your foster child—without touching. If the child's health or safety is at immediate risk, act quickly and later discuss with the child that you needed to touch him to keep him safe.
- **Clearly communicate your intentions and rules** to your foster child and repeat as often as necessary. Establish firm boundaries and stick with them. Be open to listening if your foster child needs to talk. You may end up learning more about his past, which can help you better understand his present behavior. If the child tells you about or alludes to previous abuse that was not mentioned before, talk about your concerns with the child's mental health professional or your caseworker. (See the How to Report Suspected Child Sexual Abuse handout in this course for more information on reporting.)
- **Write down the child's patterns of behavior** during certain times of the day or year. This includes uncommon sexual behaviors for the child's age range. (See the Typical and Problematic Sexual Behaviors in Children handout in this course for more information.) Share this information with the child's caseworker or mental health professional. It may prove to be useful in understanding the child.
- **Attend a support group for foster parents caring for children who have been sexually abused.** In addition to supporting your own emotional well-being, it also allows you to learn from the experiences of other families in similar situations.
- **Take care of your own physical, mental, and emotional health.** If you feel overwhelmed, you might not be as alert to patterns of behavior and might overlook clues that can help you better understand your foster child. Being consistent can be tiring. Frequently schedule time to unwind and relax. Take advantage of respite care to reenergize yourself; you must care for yourself in order to care for your children as best you can!

The information in this handout was adapted in part from the North American Council on Adoptable Children's website (<http://www.nacac.org/adoptalk/allegations.html>).

