Creating Safety Zones for Child Care Providers

Jackie Reilly, M.S., Youth Development Specialist
Sally S. Martin, Ph.D., State Extension Specialist, Human Development and Family Studies

What can you do to keep everyone safe?

Working with children is a rewarding and challenging job. In the past few years it has become even more challenging as reports of alleged child abuse and neglect have risen. Statistics show that the majority of abusers are parents, although the public perception is that abuse in child care centers is common. This false perception creates a very real challenge for child care providers and youth leaders. People who work with children have become increasingly concerned about false allegations and about providing a safe environment for themselves and the children in their care.

General Guidelines

There are some things that caregivers and youth leaders can do to help prevent child abuse and protect themselves from false allegations.

Policies and Staffing

- Encourage parents to join in your activities and to drop into the center whenever they can.
- Check references before hiring a volunteer or staff person.
- Check for any past concerns regarding guidance techniques and alleged or confirmed child abuse or neglect.
- Require minimum qualifications of staff including experience and education related to child development.
- Maintain appropriate child-to-staff ratios (check regulations) and small group sizes. You can get a copy of the regulations for child care in Nevada by calling the Nevada State Child Care Services Bureau at (702) 687-5911.
- Do not have policies that put staff at risk of being falsely accused or allow for possible abuse (such as being alone with the last child at the end of the program day or the first child at the start of the day).
**Staff Behavior**

- Never hit or strike a child - even in so-called "play."
- Do not use physical punishment of any kind.
- Avoid being alone with one child.
- It is advisable to always have at least two adults present. This prevents abuse and the potential for allegations. It also ensures children's safety in the event of an injury or other emergency.
- Hugs are okay if they are appropriate and if both people are comfortable with them. Take clues from the body language of the child or simply ask "Is it okay for me to hug you?" Likewise, if you do not feel comfortable with a hug from a child, tell her in a gentle way and suggest an alternative, such as holding her hand or putting your hand on her shoulder or arm.
- Be aware of children's personal boundaries and respect them. For example, some people like being close and getting or giving hugs, while others don't like a lot of close contact with other people. The amount of space between people that is comfortable is different for everyone. Sometimes we forget that children have those preferences, too.

**Training**

- Provide ongoing training for staff to learn current information about the care, development and guidance of children, and child abuse issues.

**Room set-up**

- Maintain equipment in good order and proper repair.
- Design play and other areas so that children can be viewed at all times. Children sometimes assault other children.

**Special Consideration for Older Youth**

Those working with older youth may face some different challenges. For example, when taking young children on a field trip you would never think of them going to a rest room or somewhere else by themselves. However, with older children you might consider letting them go to a rest room or snack bar alone. Use the buddy system for responsible older youth by having the children go together. Send a member of the staff if possible.

Additionally, as children get older they need to have some privacy. They may need a quiet area to read or write. Create quiet areas where children can be seen by staff. The exception to that is the bathroom. You may want to have a policy stating that only one child uses the bathroom at a time. If your site bathroom is in another building, one staff person could take a small group of children. Learning to take precautions is a good lesson for children. You can help them learn to plan ahead and think about their safety.

Talk with staff and the youth in your program about safety. Have them help identify safety hazards and suggest solutions.
Special Consideration for Infants and Toddlers
Just as older youth present some special challenges, so do infants and toddlers. One reason infants and toddlers are at an especially high risk of being abused or neglected is their inability to tell someone about the abuse. As child care providers we need to be especially sensitive to the needs of infants and toddlers and our policies about their care. Safety considerations include:

- Be sure that the environment is safe for infants and toddlers. For example, provide soft climbing areas with lots of padding; cover electrical outlets; remove hanging wires or cords; keep toys and equipment in good repair; cut food into small pieces or mash to avoid choking.
- Train the staff to work with infants and toddlers. For example, prepare your staff for infants who cry a lot. Let staff know that it may not always be possible to determine why an infant is crying. Staff can try feeding, changing, rocking, holding or walking with a crying infant. Taking turns trying to calm a crying infant can relieve stress for caregivers. Stressed staff can act in ways that are not positive.
- Toddlers can be very stubborn and demanding. Help staff learn how toddlers behave. For example, tantrums are normal for toddlers and can be ignored if no one is getting hurt. Knowing what is typical behavior for children makes caring for them much more positive and less stressful.

Care of infants and toddlers is extremely tiring and can be very stressful. Be sure to follow staffing regulations and allow for plenty of breaks and relief.

Summary

As stated earlier, caring for children can be challenging and rewarding. Directors and staff need to keep the safety of both children and staff in mind. Policies need to protect staff and children from situations where abuse might occur or where accusations might be made. It is well worth the time it takes to review program policies, hiring procedures, and play areas with this in mind. Additionally, educating staff (paid and volunteer) about the topic of child abuse and their role in prevention and intervention is a critical part of creating a safe environment for adults and children. A little bit of time and thought can create safety zones for staff and children alike.

Contact your local University of Nevada Cooperative Extension office for other fact sheets on the topic of child abuse and neglect.

---

The University of Nevada, Reno is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action employer and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, age, creed, national origin, veteran status, physical or mental disability, or sexual orientation, in any program or activity it operates. The University of Nevada employs only United States citizens and those aliens lawfully authorized to work in the United States.