

Duty to Report - Child Abuse is Everyone's Business

What is my duty to report?

If you have reasonable grounds to believe a child is in need of protection, based on what an average person, given his or her training, background and experience, exercising normal and honest judgment would suspect, you have a duty to report child abuse to your local Children's Aid Society (CAS). This means both children who *have* suffered harm or who are *at risk of* suffering harm. Child abuse can look like many things including physical, sexual or emotional abuse or the failure to adequately care for, provide for or supervise and protect the child. Children can also be vulnerable due to a repeated exposure to domestic violence in their home.

What happens when I call CAS?

When you call you have the option of identifying yourself or remaining anonymous. You will be connected with a social worker who will document your concerns for the child or children's safety to determine if the situation requires investigation. If it does, the investigation will begin immediately if there is serious risk or injury to the child or within 7 days otherwise. If the situation doesn't meet the eligibility requirements for an investigation, families will be provided with information and referred to community support services

What will happen with the investigation?

The investigation is an opportunity to gather information from many sources to put together a complete picture of the situation. The child protection worker will interview the child, parents, and, if appropriate, caregivers, siblings, neighbours and other community professionals connected with the child. They will also check past records of the Children's Aid Society and other community services that the child may have accessed. If it's determined that the child is in need of care, a plan for protection will be put in place. All serious allegations of child abuse are referred to the police, who will complete their own investigation and lay charges under the Criminal Code if warranted.

Will they automatically take the child away and place them in foster care?

If the social worker believes that the child is not safe, they have the authority to apprehend the child and place him or her in temporary care. If the CAS removes the child without the consent of the parents, they must bring the matter before the court within 5 days to provide evidence as to why the child was removed. The judge makes a determination about short or long term plans.

But, apprehension isn't routine. The mandate of CAS is to preserve and strengthen families, and sometimes the best way of doing that is to provide assistance to the parents and caregivers through counselling and parenting support. When it is determined that a child is at risk of harm, CAS tries to remove the risk – not the child.

What are the barriers to reporting?

There are many reasons why people, who suspect child abuse or neglect, fail to report it to the proper authorities. They can include:

- **Fear** – What if the parent finds out it's me who called CAS? Will I have to testify in court?

It's normal to be concerned for ourselves but children count on everyone around them to keep them safe. What if something happened to that child because of your silence? We all have a responsibility for those most vulnerable.

- **Legitimacy** – What if I'm wrong? Am I overreacting? I can't believe that parent would behave like that – I must have misinterpreted what I saw or understood. Do I have enough information?

If you have concerns, make the call. The child protection worker can help figure out whether the child is at risk. That's their job. It takes the responsibility off your shoulders.

- **Privacy** – It's not my business. What happens in the family stays in the family.

Child abuse is everyone's business. We all have a part to play in keeping children safe and healthy. Neighbours, friends and family often see things that others don't, and understand when something just isn't right. If a child is at risk, you may be the only person who can make the call to get them the help they need. It does take a community to protect a child.

- **Apathy** – Someone else will call.

Maybe there isn't anyone else who can see what you do. Don't assume that someone else will call. That child is counting on you.

What happens if I make a report and I'm unsatisfied with the result?

If you're still worried about the safety of the child and are unsatisfied with the result of the call or the investigation, you should first speak with the Child Protection Worker and if you are still unhappy you can speak with the supervisor of the social worker involved. They will listen to your concerns and, if needed, provide additional support. If you are still concerned after you've contacted the Child Protection Worker and Supervisor, you can elevate your concern to the upper management of CAS. Your concerns are important and will be responded to in a sensitive manner.