

## **ARE CHILDREN WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES MORE LIKELY TO BE ABUSED?**

The literature presents contradictory findings in response to this question. What is known is that children with developmental disabilities are at least as likely to be abused and neglected as the general population. There is, however, some data to suggest that we should sound the alarm bell a little louder for children with developmental disabilities.

There are many reasons why children with disabilities may be more likely to be maltreated and less likely to disclose abuse.

### **Lack of communication that may impact the ability of the child and caregiver to establish a solid relationship:**

- inability to use language to express self and/or respond to others
- inability to produce strong, clear nonverbal signals as an infant and young child
- inability to express needs clearly such as discomfort, hunger that may lead to care giver frustration or feelings of inadequacy to meet the needs of the child
- inability or impaired ability to report maltreatment

### **Judgment**

- inability to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate treatment/behavior
- inability to protect oneself, to tell when it is safe and when it isn't

### **Social**

- behavioral issues related to the disability which can increase the probability of maltreatment; for example, excessive crying, difficulty accepting comfort when upset, hyperactive, unmanageable or self-abusive, immobile and/or can't run away
- decreased attractiveness
- lack of awareness of increased unattractiveness which may draw unwarranted attention

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- easier to ignore/neglect; for example, a child who can not see or hear
- socialized to trust and obey adults
- fear of physical abandonment as well as emotional abandonment
- desire to be "normal" - being "sexual" is being "normal"

### **Stress**

- requires more extensive care-taking than typical children which, for most parents, may be too much at times

### **Education**

- lack of safety education
- lack of social skills training
- lack of sex education

### **Discrimination**

- less likely to be believed
- less valued when believed
- less able to negotiate the court system

## **DOES DISABILITY AFFECT THE PRESENTATION OF ABUSE?**

Many times, the developmental disability does affect the presentation of the abuse. Some of the reasons that this is often true are:

- More difficult to see the typical "signs and symptoms" of maltreatment.
- Only indication may be a sudden change in behavior, which may only be detectable by people who know the child well.
- Physical presentations of signs and symptoms of abuse must be very carefully evaluated and investigated. For example, children with cerebral palsy really do fall down a lot. Some children with disabling conditions show bruises much more easily to very slight stimuli. Thus bruising may not indicate physical abuse. On the other hand, in cases of sexual abuse physical or medical evidence may be the only clear indication that abuse has occurred.

## **NONVERBAL CHILDREN**

Traditional casework methods imply that clients will be able to communicate their experiences with another. This is usually a combination of verbal and nonverbal communication with the language of "play" included for young children. Traditional interviewing methods may not be appropriate for children with developmental disabilities who have limited or unusual use of verbal language, weak or idiosyncratic nonverbal cues, and/or atypical play. As one caseworker asked, "How do you interview a child who cannot talk?" The answer is you don't interview that child using traditional methods.

Children who have limited or unusual uses of language represent a special challenge for child welfare caseworkers who acknowledge that such children may be at increased risk, easy targets for abusive adults and the least able to ask for help. In such cases caseworkers will have to rely on:

- Information from as many people as possible who are regularly involved in the child's life, and
- Consultation from an interdisciplinary team, including a physician with considerable experience in working with children with disabilities.