

Allegations Happen: How to Prevent and Survive Them

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"It's the worst thing that's ever happened to me," said one parent about the time her foster daughter filed an abuse allegation against her. Most often false, allegations of abuse against parents who foster and adopt children with special needs are frighteningly common. When parenting these special children, it is in our best interest to prevent situations that could be construed as inappropriate, and seek out help when an allegation disrupts our lives.

Whether false or confirmed, allegations arise for different reasons. We hope that children who are abused by their caregivers will notify a teacher, social worker, or someone else in authority. But sometimes children whose backgrounds include abuse are highly sensitized to triggers that they associate with abuse. You may just be leading a child to a time out after he kicks his sister; but the instant you grab his arm, your foster son may flash back to times when he was dragged to a room and whipped with his birth father's belt. As children age through the foster care system, and grow in street wisdom and anger, many also learn that allegations are a ticket out of a placement, a means of getting attention, and a way to keep parents who are starting to get too close a safe distance away.

The general public is concerned about child abuse and neglect, but not very knowledgeable about how parents must try to deal with some very difficult behaviors presented by abused children. The media is quick to shine the spotlight on a few foster and adoptive parents who abuse children in their care, and say little about those who are diligently working to improve children's lives. Once they happen, allegations are hard to live down.

Consequences of Allegations

When I was a social worker, a 13-year-old girl in my caseload alleged that her 71-year-old foster grandfather had sexually abused her. The grandfather had a heart condition and I thought the reports would kill him! After looking into the charges, investigators discovered that the girl was distorting the situation and reenacting a previous abuse situation with her birth grandfather.

Though not substantiated, the charge became part of the family's case file, and the stress family members experienced lingered on. Many parents describe allegations and the subsequent investigation as a process of loss and grief. Parents may lose their sense of identity, their self-esteem, and their trust in the worker or agency. Children may be removed—another painful loss for both the children and parents. Even after child protection closes the case, a parent may feel that the family's good name is forever tarnished and the episode will never be resolved.

Allegations that uncover licensing violations or substantiated abuse claims can cause additional stress. Depending on the severity of the infraction, foster parents may be placed on probation, be issued a correction order, or have their license temporarily suspended or permanently revoked. Serious allegations may result in a criminal charge that could land a parent in jail, and forever ruin chances of fostering or adopting another child.

Allegation Prevention Strategies

Foster and adoptive families who have lots of children, including children of different races, and who have been fostering for a long time are at greater risk of being reported for alleged abuse. All families who care for children with special needs face some risk, and every parent can take steps to keep situations from turning into allegations. Below are some ideas for parents to consider.

- **Know your limits.** If you are not comfortable handling children with certain challenging backgrounds and behaviors, don't set yourself up by bringing such children into your home.
- **Learn all you can about each child before placement.** You have a right to know about previous abuse and allegations. Ask: "Has this child been abused? In what way? Who were the perpetrators? Have there been any abuse allegations?" Had the foster family whose 13-year-old girl charged the grandfather with abuse known about her abuse history, they would never have left the foster grandfather alone with her.
- **Make sure that men and boys in your house are never alone with a girl who has been sexually abused.** Proactive precautions are very important in this situation, especially at the beginning of the placement. Talk with your partner and others in the household about this safety plan, and stay proactive.
- **Give each sexually abused child his or her own bedroom.** I know this is difficult, but why put another child in your home at risk? If a child's boundaries have been invaded, he or she needs to re-learn proper boundaries.
- **Be crystal clear about rules for dress, privacy, touching, etc.** Caregivers must agree on house rules, boundaries, and consequences. Each child comes from a different culture of parenting, sexuality, sleeping habits, dress, touch, and more, and needs to learn what is appropriate. As a foster mom, I talked about sexuality as one of the house rules. "In this house," I would say, "my husband gets his sexual needs met with me and only me." Sound crude? Yes, but I said it in a matter-of-fact way and set a very clear boundary that the teenage girls we worked with really needed.
- **Never use physical discipline.** Corporal punishment is not allowed in foster care, but I know some folks think that once the kids are adopted, physical discipline is okay. Don't do it. Children with a history of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse often misinterpret physical discipline and an allegation is likely. Physical discipline can also undermine attachment.
- **Avoid teasing, horseplay, wrestling, and suggestive language.** These are acts of intimacy, and intimacy is just what abused children often resist. In addition, the child may get a different message than you intend during the close physical contact involved.
- **Document sexual acting out in writing.** Send reports to the child's social worker and therapist. Then, if another incident comes to light, the worker and therapist can see that there might be a pattern to the child's acting out that perhaps relates to past experiences.

- **Document behavior patterns.** When a child enters your home, use a calendar to record changes in the child's behavior; inappropriate words or actions during birth parent visits; the child's behavior following visits; the cause of scratches, bruises, or other injuries; and any patterns of behavior that seem to follow specific events or times of the year (like anniversaries of certain past events).
- **Participate in a support group.** As foster and adoptive parents of children with special needs, we need to share the struggles and joys that are a part of our lives with those who can empathize and support us. We need folks who can laugh and cry with us and really understand foster and adoptive parents' journey.
- **Reserve personal time to reduce stress.** Know what really pushes your buttons, and establish a calming plan. Post 20 calming tips on your refrigerator and model stress-reduction techniques for your children. Then, make plans for a weekly—yes, weekly—time away from the children. Take care of yourself; you are the child's greatest gift!

Allegation Survival Strategies

Sometimes, despite a family's efforts to prevent them, allegations will happen. Maybe things are going a little too well with Jimmy—a 12-year-old with a history of sexual abuse—and he starts to get scared. The week after a lively game of Twister with his foster dad, Jimmy tells his worker that the foster dad was touching and pressing his body against Jimmy's. Jimmy claims it was sexual abuse, and soon child protection opens a case file to investigate Jimmy's allegation.

The foster family is looking at weeks or months of investigation, and Jimmy moves to an emergency shelter. What can the parents do to take care of themselves?

- **Try to stay positive.** Assume that the charge will be proven false, and try not to presume guilt. Statistics I've seen say that about 65 to 70 percent of all allegations are false. Child protection has to investigate to make certain that the child is not being abused. The best thing you can do is cooperate.
- **Document everything.** Start a notebook to record details of every phone conversation, personal interview, and correspondence related to the allegation. Write in pen, and be prepared to use the notebook to back up your story in court if need be. Request copies of the written charge against your family, as well as the letter that formally states that the allegations were unfounded.
- **Educate yourself.** Insist on getting a copy of your state's foster care rules and laws pertaining to allegations and abuse, and learn about county or agency policies and procedures too. Find out what will happen during the investigation, what your rights are, and how you can appeal an investigator's determination.
- **Behave appropriately.** During interviews, make your point and then stop talking. Speak with confidence, and be factual, honest, respectful, and business like. Avoid emotional language when telling your side of the story. It may be extremely hard, but you must try to be objective.

- **Meet with people who are gathering information.** If an investigator asks to meet with you, don't keep her waiting. If you need to, bring along a friend or someone from your support group who can give you perspective on how the meeting went.
- **Communicate with your partner.** Allegations, especially those of sexual abuse, can really drive a wedge between partners. The husband thinks, "How could they think I would do something like that?!" The wife wonders, "Could it possibly be true?!" If not openly discussed, these questions can pull couples apart just when they need each other's support the most.
- **Know your rights.** Don't be afraid to appeal, request a waiver, and learn how the grievance procedure works. If need be, hire legal counsel. I would especially recommend hiring a good attorney for sexual abuse allegations.

How Support Groups Can Help

In addition to counseling new foster and adoptive families about taking conscious steps to prevent allegations, support groups can be very helpful when a family is going through or has just concluded an allegation investigation. Sometimes, the best help is just being there. To support family members who are going through an investigation:

- **Offer a sympathetic ear.** This is a time when families really need the support group! Make them feel welcome by respectfully listening.
- **Stay neutral.** It is not the group's job to fix the problem. There are many sides to the story, and the group should be objective. Agency bashing helps no one.
- **Share information.** Encourage members to talk about their experiences with allegations, and share local allegation policy and procedural information with the entire group.
- **Suggest resources.** Direct the family to legal services and suggest how they can obtain agency policies concerning allegations.
- **Assign a mentor.** Parents going through an allegation may have an easier time talking to one person who has experienced an allegation rather than the whole group. A call from someone who can say, "I've walked the walk," can mean so much during this time.

After the investigation is over, ask for help to regain your equilibrium, rebuild, and move on. Take really good care of yourself. Think hard and give yourself some time off before bringing a child back into your home, or accepting another placement. Take care of the children still in the home. Difficult times can be therapeutic and healing, showing children that we can have tough times, but as families we are strong and resilient. If you can't prevent an allegation, at least do what you can to survive, learn, and thrive.

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