

PARENTING IN CANADA

This pamphlet is written for parents who have come to Canada from another country and who want information about Canadian laws on child rearing. It is intended to answer the questions of parents who are unfamiliar with parenting in Canada and to suggest places parents can go for help in their community.

Every parent wants to raise healthy and happy children. Because children depend on adults for love and care, they are given special recognition under the law. Canada is a signatory of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which is a set of standards to protect children's basic rights and freedoms.

Canada also has its own specific laws that protect children and give them certain rights. Some of these are federal laws, which affect the children in every province and territory. Others, such as child protection laws, vary somewhat depending on what province or territory you live in. However, the basic protections are the same all across the country. This pamphlet provides general information in response to questions asked by many parents. If you would like specific information, contact your community centre or the provincial/territorial department of social, family or community services.

WHAT IS CHILD ABUSE?

When a child is hurt intentionally or when a parent or caregiver fails to protect the children in their care, that is called child abuse. Child abuse is against the law in Canada.

Every province and territory in Canada has a child protection law to ensure that children are not harmed. There are different kinds of child abuse.

- Physical abuse is mistreatment (usually by a parent or caregiver) that results in injury to a child.
- Sexual abuse is when a child is used for the sexual gratification of an adult or an older child.
- Neglect is the failure to meet a child's basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, medical attention, education, and protection from harm.

Most child abuse occurs in the home at the hands of someone the child knows and trusts.

WHAT IS REASONABLE DISCIPLINE IN CANADA?

Attitudes toward discipline and punishment are changing in Canada. In the past, children were viewed more like property than as individuals and the way parents treated their children was considered to be a private matter. Today, children's basic rights are guaranteed by the law and our society is actively involved in promoting the welfare of all children, as well as taking steps to ensure their protection.

Canadian society also recognizes that parents all have their own distinctive values and beliefs. Parents have a lot of discretion to set their own rules and parenting practices. However, some types of conduct are considered abusive of the trust placed in parents and are against the law in Canada.

A growing number of Canadians believe that physical force is an unsuitable means of disciplining children. That includes not only slapping and kicking, but also tying up children or locking them up. Physical discipline of babies is completely unacceptable. Most parents are aware that handling babies roughly—whether

in anger or playfulness—is *extremely* dangerous to the child. Shaking can cause serious injury or death.

Presently, the law allows parents to use "reasonable force" to discipline children. What is reasonable depends on the situation, but judges have indicated that forms of physical punishment that were acceptable in the past may no longer be permitted. Clearly, any injury that requires medical attention is not reasonable discipline. Physical discipline that results in bruising, welts, or broken skin might also be considered abuse. Parents who use belts, electrical cords, or other objects for physical discipline can seriously harm their child.

It is a fact that physical punishment can lead to physical abuse when parents lose control and strike their children in anger. We know there are more effective and positive ways to help children behave. If you are frequently angry or frustrated by your child's misbehaviour, learning different ways to handle the situation can help you and your child. Check with your community centre, public health department, or the agency that provided this pamphlet for information on how to best deal with misbehaviour.

WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

Sexual abuse is when a child is used for the sexual gratification of an adult or an older child.

It is against the law for an adult to:

- touch a child in a sexual way,
- encourage or force a child to touch another person in a sexual way,

- encourage or force a child to participate in any sexual activity, or
- tell a child to touch themselves for an adult's sexual purposes.

Some examples of sexual abuse by an adult include:

- rubbing a child's genitals for sexual purposes, and
- watching a child undress for sexual pleasure.

It is considered inappropriate for parents to sleep in the same bed as older children, or to watch older children when they are getting dressed. Older children who can take care of themselves should be allowed to go to the toilet alone.

WHAT IS NEGLECT?

Neglect is the failure to meet a child's basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, medical attention, education, and protection from harm. If you are having trouble providing for your family, help is available in the form of income assistance, food banks, emergency shelters, and donated clothing.

Parents are legally bound to make sure their children get the education to which they are entitled. Children are required by law to attend school until they are at least 16 years old.

For their safety, young children should never be left unattended. It is against the law to leave a child alone in a situation where they might be injured or in danger. If parents go out and leave a child under the age of 10, they are required to arrange for a responsible person to take care of their child while they

are gone. It is dangerous to leave a child alone in a car, even if you lock the car and even if you are only gone for a few minutes.

WHAT ABOUT REPORTING CHILD ABUSE?

Because children are dependent on adults for love, support and nurturing, everyone in the community has responsibility for protecting children from abuse — whether by a parent, sibling, babysitter, relative, family friend, or stranger. In every Canadian province, anyone who suspects that a child is being physically or sexually abused or neglected is required to report their suspicions.

Suspected child abuse should be reported to a child protection worker, the department of social services or children's aid society, to a doctor, or to the police. The person reporting suspected abuse is protected from any kind of legal action, provided the report is not a deliberately false accusation.

WHAT HAPPENS IF MY FAMILY IS REPORTED?

If someone says your child is abused or neglected, a child protection worker will visit to try to determine if abuse is occurring. The worker must decide if a child is being abused. If the worker thinks the child is at risk, the worker must then decide how to protect the child and help the family. The worker may offer services to the family or decide to temporarily remove the child from the home. Because some forms of child abuse are crimes, the police may be involved with the investigation and charges might be laid against the suspected abuser.

If parents disagree with a child protection worker's decision, they can talk to the worker's supervisor. If the supervisor does not agree, the parents can get a lawyer to help deal with the child protection agency. Parents who cannot afford a lawyer may be able to get free legal assistance through the legal aid office. If a child is removed from parental care, the parents always have the right to go to court to have a judge decide whether they are unfit to care for their children.

IS HELP AVAILABLE FOR PARENTS?

Most parents love their children but sometimes people strike out at those closest to them when they are in crisis. If one parent is abusing a child, the other parent is legally obliged to try to protect the child by asking for help or taking the child and leaving the abuser.

Help is available for parents and families. Most family and community centres offer parenting courses on how to deal with anger and stress, and how to provide a safe and loving environment for children. Many Canadian schools also have programs to help parents learn new ways to deal with problems and develop skills for handling crises. Learning about child development can help parents to understand their children and to know what to expect from children at different ages.

Find out if your community centre or school has parenting classes, counsellors, support groups, and short-term or emergency child care. It is not easy to ask for help, but all parents have difficulties from time to time. Just talking to other parents who have had similar experiences can be a big relief.

Try not to let yourself feel isolated or alone. There are people in the community who are there to help — many of whom have first-hand experience with the challenges of adapting to a new culture and a new country. It is better to get help early, before problems get worse. If you do not have a community centre, talk to your doctor, minister, or department of family services.

Regardless of your background or citizenship, you are entitled to the services in the community. Parents and children are important and valued members of Canadian society, no matter what language they speak or what country they come from.

For more information about services for parents and children in your community, contact the agency below.

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