



Children with Disabilities: Preventing Abuse and Neglect

The Heightened Risk

Children with disabilities are at a higher risk of child abuse and neglect than other children. They may have more difficulty understanding and telling someone about abusive situations. We all have a role and responsibility to make sure that children are safe.

We Can All Empower and Support Children

Children with disabilities need help to communicate and protect themselves. We can help children and youth find ways to do this to ensure they can become a part of stopping abuse and neglect from happening. Here are some ways we can help:

- Teach all children and youth about personal safety, setting appropriate boundaries, and building healthy relationships.
- Teach all children and youth about their bodies by using common words and symbols for parts of the body.
- Help children practice communicating with other children, youth, and trusted adults.
- Give children and youth choices and teach them it is ok to say no (verbally or non-verbally) to keep themselves safe.
- Know and understand that all behavior of a child or youth is communication.
- Help children and youth make friends so they have more support from peers and healthy connections in the community.
- Talk to children and youth about the importance of telling a trusted adult if someone does something to their body that is not ok.

The Department of Children and Families is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. If you have a disability and need to access services, receive information in an alternate format, or need information translated to another language, please call the Division of Safety and Permanence at (608) 266-8787. Individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind or speech disabled can use the free Wisconsin Relay Service (WRS) – 711 to contact the department.

Know About the Higher Risk of Abuse and Neglect

National studies show that children with disabilities are **3.4 times more likely** to experience abuse and neglect.

Sullivan and Knutson (2000)

In Wisconsin, **1/5 of children** who are in out-of-home care have an identified disability.

WI Annual Out-of-Home Care Report 2021

We can all help prevent abuse and neglect.

- Learn more about the increased risk
- Support families
- Empower children
- Strengthen communities





Families Are Important to Prevention

Families are strong. Families have found ways to help keep their children happy, healthy, and safe. Building strong relationships will support families to help their children learn and grow. Families are teachers and leaders in helping communities keep children safe. Families can be a part of prevention by:

- Talking with their children about personal safety, setting boundaries, and healthy relationships.
- Surrounding their family with safe and helpful people.
- Knowing where to find resources to help support their child.
- Continuing to learn about their child's disability as they grow and develop.
- Finding events in their community that are supportive to their whole family.
- Celebrating what their child with a disability CAN do! Helping others see these gifts and talents too.
- Knowing their child best and being their strongest advocate.
- Being aware of times when their child is more isolated or alone and at greater risk of abuse.
- Taking care of themselves. Their health is important to the whole family's health.
- Create a 'positive student profile' to share your child's strengths with their educators and care providers.

What Child-Serving Organizations Can Do

There are many places that provide services to children with disabilities and their families. These may be childcare providers, educators, school staff, Birth-to-3 programs, or other specialized therapists. The agencies who employ these people play an important part in creating safe and supportive environments for children and families. Management in these places can help prevent abuse and neglect by:

- Recognizing families as experts on their children and leaders in decisions about their child.
- Maintaining open relationships and building rapport with ALL staff.
- Making sure their staff are knowledgeable about children's disabilities and best practices in supporting behavior.
- Maintaining safe staff/child ratios.
- Using good screening methods when hiring staff and regularly completing background checks.
- Training and supporting staff in on-going ways. For example: mentoring, coaching, and on-going feedback.
- Including all children and youth in all activities in developmentally appropriate ways.
- Meeting all requirements of your service field's certification(s), if applicable. (e.g., licensing, or other)



What Communities Can Do

First, raise awareness about the greater risk for children with disabilities. Then, work towards more understanding, support, and inclusion of people with disabilities in communities. Some ways communities can do this are:

- Include parents and caregiver's voices in decision-making (e.g., invite onto committees and boards).
- Find ways to encourage families to participate in community planning and make these experiences accessible to them (e.g., time of day, enough notice to find child care).
- Encourage businesses to offer family-friendly policies.
- Share the responsibility of protecting the well-being of children and youth with disabilities.
- See the gifts and talents children and youth with disabilities bring. Plan activities and spaces around them.
- Support inclusion of children and youth with disabilities in everyday life.
- Develop community partnerships with all agencies who support children, youth, and families.
- Offer general training to community members on child development.
- Require training for first responders, librarians, and other community professionals about children and youth with disabilities, including how to identify and support them.

Resources

- For resources and services in your community: <https://211wisconsin.communityos.org/> or dial 2-1-1
- For connection to resources specific for families of children and youth with disabilities: www.wellbadger.org or call 1-800-642-7837
- To learn more about the Heightened Risk: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/reports/pdf/act365.pdf>
- To learn more about state services and programs, and the child welfare system: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/>
- Family Resource Centers near you: <https://preventionboard.wi.gov/Pages/ForFamilies/FamilyResourceCenters.aspx>
- Parent Resource Center: <https://supportingfamilies.together.org/resources/>
- To find your Regional Centers for Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs: <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/cyshcn/regionalcenters.htm>
- For information on what to do if you suspect abuse or neglect: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/reportabuse>
- For strategies on how to include children with disabilities: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/youngstar/pdf/eci/wi-eci-toolkit.pdf>
- To learn more about the high rates of abuse and neglect of youth with disabilities, and what you can do: <https://pulmonary.pediatrics.med.ufl.edu/files/2018/06/Poster-Trauma-Informed-Care-Practices.pdf>
- For information on special education and disabilities: <https://dpi.wi.gov/sped/a-z>
- To find learning opportunities about children and youth with disabilities: <https://wspei.org/learning-opp/>