

## PREVENTING CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

### OVERVIEW

This lesson explores many areas of child well-being, including family risk factors and prevalence rates of child abuse, basic infant care skills, and age-appropriate child training techniques. Emphasis is also given to how stressful parenting can be, with discussion on how teens can begin developing the skills they will need to be a parent that provides a safe and healthy home environment. Shaken Baby Syndrome and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) are then discussed in detail, as this topic serves as a gateway for introducing a variety of child care issues, including healthy pregnancy awareness and basic infant needs.

### GOALS

- To increase awareness of the facts surrounding child abuse.
- To gain understanding of the proper care techniques when caring for infants.
- To explore coping and support strategies in order to have the resources to later form and maintain a safe and healthy home environment.
- To increase knowledge about abusive and neglectful situations and how to prevent them.

### LESSON-AT-A-GLANCE

- 14.1 What is Child Abuse?  
**Activities:** Test Your Knowledge; Abuse in the Media
- 14.2 Ways to Prepare for a Safe Home  
**Activity:** Positive Parenting Strategies
- 14.3 The Realities of Taking Care of a Newborn  
**Activity:** Shaken Baby Syndrome Video
- 14.4 What Happens When: Age Appropriate Instruction and Discipline  
**Activity:** Wrap-up: What Could Have Been Done Differently?

### MATERIALS CHECKLIST

- *Test Your Knowledge* Quiz- Student Copy (Duplicate one per student)
- *Positive Parenting Strategies* Worksheet- (Duplicate one per student)
- *Shaken Baby Syndrome* DVD
- *Category Cards*

## PREPARATION

- ☑ Prior to this class period, ask that students find a newspaper, internet, or magazine article that talks about a case of child abuse or neglect; or, as the teacher, you may wish to come with sample articles to distribute to the students.
- ☑ Read through the lesson to become familiar with the material.
- ☑ Decide if you would prefer to break students into groups for the activities or have one large class discussion.
- ☑ Watch the 9 minute DVD and determine if you would like the students to take notes during the film, and/or if you wish to discuss the material after it is over.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND RESEARCH

As this curriculum has focused on promoting healthy relationships in teens, it cannot be overlooked that the majority of students will one day become parents. With that in mind, putting teens on the right path for a life of healthy relationships should include an introduction to the basic skills of forming a safe, healthy, nurturing home for children. This chapter is based on research pointing to five protective factors that can be introduced to parents in order to reduce the risk of child neglect and/or abuse.<sup>i</sup> These factors are (1) nurturing and attachment, (2) knowledge of parenting and child development, (3) parental resilience skills, (4) social connectedness, (5) concrete supports for parents (such as childcare, healthcare, and food or housing assistance programs). Each of these factors has been incorporated into this chapter in some form.

One of the important issues that must be discussed when talking about healthy parenting is the prevalence of child abuse and neglect. Due to some of the key environmental risk factors for child abuse and neglect, this chapter can help teens reflect on the seriousness of the consequences of abuse if the principles outlined in previous chapters are not heeded. For example, several studies have found that substance abuse is a significant factor in child maltreatment, while several others have found that partner abuse in romantic relationships is strongly tied to later child abuse. This point should be used to emphasize to teens that decisions that are made today about who they date or whether they choose to use alcohol or drugs can impact the *children* they may have responsibility for in the future.

### 14.1 What is Child Abuse?

In this section, teens are introduced to the prevalence of child abuse, and the various risk factors for abuse.

Suggested script for introducing the lesson:

- ◆ ***Many people have different ideas as to what types of behaviors can be defined as “child abuse.” If you were asked to describe child abuse to someone, what would you say?*** Give the class a few moments to answer before moving on.

- ◆ *While there are many definitions that may be accurate, here is the legal definition that the court system uses for child abuse cases: “Child abuse is any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm.”*
- ◆ *As you can see from this definition, abuse can be a number of activities. It ranges from speaking to another person inappropriately or touching another’s body in any way without permission to violent physical actions. Abuse is typically categorized in four ways: 1) physical 2) psychological/emotional 3) sexual or 4) neglect. We will discuss these in more detail later in the lesson, but first I want to do an activity that will help you to get a realistic idea about how often abuse happens and factors that increase the likelihood of abuse.*

### ACTIVITY—TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Announce to the class that they are going to take a short quiz in order to better understand how frequently child abuse occurs. Distribute the *Test Your Knowledge About Abuse* quiz (Resource 14a on CD-ROM) and ask the class to follow along as you read each question aloud. Ask students to raise their hands if they think the answer is “A”, “B”, etc., then provide the correct answers along with the supplemental information following each answer. Request that students mark the correct answer on their quiz sheet to keep as a reference for the prevalence of child abuse. After the activity, ask students if there were any statistics that they found to be particularly surprising. This activity should serve as an informative introduction to this lesson on child abuse.

- ◆ *Before we started that quiz, we had discussed that there are four types of abuse. You may be interested to know that with those statistics that we just talked about, 64% of abuse cases deal with neglect, 16% deal with physical abuse, 9% deal with sexual abuse, and 7% deal with psychological or emotional abuse. Let’s take a minute to discuss the four types of abuse.*
  1. *Who can give me an example of physical abuse?* Students will probably mention violent acts such as punching, kicking, choking, etc. Acknowledge that those are all good examples. *Did you know that physical abuse can also include giving someone a dangerous substance, like a drug or a poison? Also, when you are dealing with small children, physical abuse can include shaking the child, which can cause serious damage. We will talk about shaken baby syndrome later today.*
  2. *Sexual abuse is probably the most sensitive topic when it comes to talking about child abuse. This can include any form of sexual contact with a child,*

*using a child for sexual films, or forcing a child to witness sexual activity—including deliberately exposing the child to pornography.*

3. ***Who can give me an example of psychological or emotional abuse?*** Make sure that threatening a child, deliberate embarrassment, repeated insults, and excessive/inappropriate teasing are all covered. Make sure students know how serious this can be.
4. ***The last category is neglect. Who can tell me how neglect is different from physical abuse?*** After students have responded, it may be helpful to give this definition of neglect: ***Neglect is the failure of a parent or guardian to fulfill the emotional or physical needs of a child, and not provide what is needed in the child's life for overall well-being. Remember, neglect is by far the most common form of abuse. So, who can give me some examples of neglect?***

#### ACTIVITY—ABUSE IN THE MEDIA

Ask the students to get out their articles that had been assigned during the last class period, or pass out the articles that you have previously selected. Pass out the “Category Cards” (physical, sexual, emotional, neglect) and inform students that they will be going around the room summarizing their articles (if the class is large, take volunteers or divide the class into groups and have each group nominate a speaker, rather than taking the time to have each student share). After each student has summarized his or her article, have the class use their cards to “vote” as to what type of abuse was present in that situation. (Remind students that each of these can represent more than one type of abuse.)

*Caution: This can be a sensitive subject for some students. Some articles may contain information that may be disturbing for students. Use wisdom and judgment when articles are shared.*

## 14.2 Ways to Prepare for a Safe Home

Adolescents should have a chance to develop appropriate child-care skills before becoming parents. This section will discuss ways in which adolescents can begin to develop the skills they will need in order to prepare for future parenthood.

- ◆ ***Imagine all of the emotions that you would feel if you were to bring your baby home for the first time. Many new parents are scared and overwhelmed. One important way to prepare yourself to be a good parent is to develop a few child-care skills before you become a parent—even as a teenager it is never too early to start! What are some situations that you could seek out in order to gain experience with children?***  
Students will most likely mention baby-sitting, taking care of younger siblings, working in a child-care setting, being around children of a friend's or a family member's, etc.
- ◆ ***There are some research studies that suggest seven skills that every young adult should develop to prepare for a future as a parent. In fact, many of these are helpful for difficult situations that you may encounter right now! Many of you have probably already developed some of these skills, but you may want to take a minute to write them down as I read them so that you can think about ways to improve them in your own lives.***
- ◆ ***Here are the seven skills that many successful parents have learned:***
  1. ***Anger management***
  2. ***Problem solving***
  3. ***Empathy (being able to relate to what others are feeling and act accordingly)***
  4. ***Understanding of appropriate relationship skills and boundaries (Remember: abuse in a couple's relationship highly increases the risk of child abuse)***
  5. ***Finding appropriate sources for support***
  6. ***Finding ways to manage your stress***
  7. ***Finding appropriate ways to express your feelings and emotions***
- ◆ ***Managing anger and emotions is one of the most important issues to tackle in order to make sure you have a safe and healthy home. Here are some tips that professionals recommend when you begin to feel stress and/or become angry with your child:***
  1. ***Give yourself a time-out to take control of your emotions—in a separate room from your child.***
  2. ***Discipline your child when you are "cool," not when you are angry. Discipline is to teach limits to a child, not to give you a way to release your anger.***
  3. ***Regain your patience—stop, sit down, and try to remain calm. If you have a friend or relative near you, don't be afraid to call for a little help.***
  4. ***If your child is old enough to communicate, ask what the problem is. Sometimes children act out simply because they don't know how else to handle what they are feeling.***
  5. ***Call a family time-out and have everyone take a walk together.***

6. *Take a break from the child to do something productive. Go water your plants, clean the kitchen, or start the laundry. Checking something off of your mental “to-do” list can help alleviate some of the stress you are feeling.*

### ACTIVITY—Anger Management Strategies

At every stage in life, there are going to be times where things are simply not going as they should, and you may become angry or frustrated. One reality of having a child is that all children will “act up” and misbehave at times, but when poor choices or misbehavior happens at the same time as your bad mood, things can easily get out of control. In order to avoid taking out your anger on a child or spouse, it is important to develop anger management techniques that work for you. For each scenario, think about the techniques that you use right now to manage anger in irritating or stressful situations, and how you could apply those skills in the future with children.

After reading the script, present the “Positive Parenting Strategies” handout (Resource 14b on CD-ROM) to the class. Depending on time, either divide the class into groups and assign one situation to each group to discuss amongst themselves, or read the situations and allow all class members to participate freely.

- ◆ *Do you remember some of the things that we have talked about during previous classes about making wise choices regarding alcohol use and staying away from drugs? Just like we discussed earlier today, drugs and alcohol play a huge role in the risk of abuse within a home. That is why it is important to develop healthy habits right now: just as drugs and alcohol could ruin your life during your teenage years, they can be horribly damaging to an adult—especially a parent!*
- ◆ *Another issue that you should keep in mind is the healthy relationship skills that we have talked about previously in this class. Do you remember from the quiz earlier today that partner abuse is highly related to child abuse? If you use the strategies that we have talked about for forming healthy relationships today, you will have a better chance of finding not only a better spouse, but also a better parenting partner.*

## 14.3 The Realities of Taking Care of a Newborn

- ◆ *As we mentioned earlier, bringing a baby home for the first time can be a very scary thing for new parents. One of the biggest concerns is “How do I take care of this tiny, fragile person?!” What are some of the basic things that you think should be done to keep a newborn or toddler safe? Issues such as car seats, doctor check-ups, and baby-proofing will probably be mentioned. Use this conversation as an introduction to child care.*

- ◆ *One important issue of childcare that you should be aware of is Shaken Baby Syndrome. We are going to watch a video so that you can get an idea of what this is and how to prevent it.*

#### ACTIVITY—SHAKEN BABY SYNDROME VIDEO

*You may wish to follow up the video with a short discussion period allowing the students to share what they have learned, if anything surprised them, etc.*

- ◆ *One important thing to discuss when dealing with the care of a newborn is Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or SIDS. Who can tell me what SIDS is? Make sure that the following definition is covered in the students' definitions of SIDS: **SIDS is the sudden, unexplained death of a child under the age of one year old, typically occurring during sleep.***
- ◆ *Although by definition the exact causes of SIDS are unknown, researchers have found ways to reduce the risk of SIDS for your baby. First, there are many things that women can do during their pregnancies to reduce the risk.*
  - *One of the most important precautions is to wait until you are out of your teen years to have a child. Babies born to teen mothers have the highest rate of SIDS.*
  - *When you are older and decide to have children, wait at least one year between giving birth and becoming pregnant again—shorter time periods between pregnancies has been found to increase the risk of SIDS.*
  - *Faithful physician's visits beginning early during pregnancy are important in order to reduce the risk for going into labor prematurely. Premature birth is a significant risk factor of SIDS.*
  - *Avoid smoking and drug use during pregnancy, as these have been found to increase the risk of SIDS.*
- ◆ *Once you have given birth to a healthy baby, there are a few things that you can do to further reduce your baby's risk of SIDS.*
  - *Always place a baby to sleep on his or her back in a crib with a firm mattress (never on an adult bed or a couch) that is clear of pillows, blankets, and bumper pads.*
  - *Only put on as much clothing as is needed to keep the baby warm without blankets, removing any extra layers before laying the baby down.*
  - *Keep the crib in the parents' room for the first sixth months in order to keep careful watch for any potential problems—if on any occasion the baby should temporarily stop breathing, go limp, gag excessively, or turn blue, call 911 immediately.*

*y minor illnesses such as a cold or cough) and avoid large crowds when you have the baby out with you.*

- *Finally, request that people wash their hands before holding or playing with the baby. SIDS commonly occurs in association with another issue such as a cold or diarrhea, which can be picked up easily from unwashed hands.*

## **14.4 What Happens When: Age Appropriate Instruction and Discipline**

One of the risk factors for child abuse in a home that we have not yet discussed is an unrealistic expectation for how a child will react when given instructions. With this in mind, it is important to understand what types of discipline and instruction work best with certain age groups. Explain to students that deciding how to discipline a child can be a very difficult decision, with many proposed methods of discipline circulating in the media.

- ◆ *Many parents become frustrated when dealing with babies or toddlers because it can seem like they just don't get it. Until about age two, curiosity is the natural inclination, so rather than constantly battling your toddler to keep him or her away from things that aren't appropriate to play with, the better solution is to simply remove things from the child's reach. Should the child still manage to grab something, simply remove the child from the object while sternly, but calmly saying "no." Children in this age group will not understand corporal punishment, but time-out can be effective as long as it is kept to a short time frame. A general rule for time-outs is one minute for each year, according to their age. It is important to remember that children at this age learn many of their behaviors from watching adults—so always strive to be a good role-model!*
- ◆ *Between the ages of three and five, children can begin to understand that a connection exists between their actions and consequences, so this is a prime time to begin establishing simple rules within the family. Even if a child does something inappropriate, never tell a child that she/he is bad, lazy, stupid, a failure, or any other put down. Help her/him recognize what it is about that behavior that needs to be changed. All children need to feel loved, regardless of what they may do. You can say, "I don't like the way you acted at the soccer game, but I still love you." Remind him/her that everyone makes mistakes and these are opportunities to learn and grow. Explain to the child what you expect in the future and why that action was wrong. Do not forget to reward good behaviors. For example, if you have previously scolded Bobby for not sharing well, praise him the next time you observe him sharing toys during playtime.*
- ◆ *As you probably know, one of the biggest debates when discussing punishment for children is whether corporal punishment (spanking) is appropriate. While many*

*mixed messages exist, three very good points have been made against spanking by child experts:*

1. Spanking could give children the message that it is acceptable to hit if they are very angry and feel that the other person deserves it
2. Spanking can be done too harshly in anger and can physically harm the child
3. Spanking may teach children to become afraid of parents when they have done something wrong out of fear of pain

### ACTIVITY—WRAP-UP: WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN DONE DIFFERENTLY?

Each of the following scenarios are based on events that actually happened in the state of Missouri in recent years. For each event, pull together the information from the lesson today and explain what the parent could have done differently. *(If you would like for the students to work in smaller groups—and there is sufficient time—divide the class into groups and give each one of the case studies to discuss.)*

**CASE 1:** An eight-week-old infant was fussy, so his mother decided to lay him in bed with her to take a nap. He was placed on his stomach and quickly fell asleep. When the mother awoke, the baby was face down in the bedding and he was not breathing.

**CASE 2:** An infant was put to bed in a standard crib on his side. Afraid that the baby may get cold, the mother left a pillow and blanket in the crib. He was found unresponsive with his face against the pillow.

**CASE 3:** The mother of a 6-month-old was drinking heavily and smoking marijuana when she became involved in an intense argument with the baby's father—who had a history of physical violence. She consumed even more alcohol and took the baby to sleep with her in a full-size bed. The baby was found unresponsive the next morning.

**Note:** *Make sure that it is mentioned that previous discussions had advised parents to move a baby's crib into the room so they can be attentive to any problems during the night. Ensure that students realize that there is no way that a parent going to bed with excessive amounts of drugs and alcohol in their system would be awakened by the sounds of a struggling baby.*

**CASE 4:** A one-year-old was left in the care of her mother's boyfriend while she took an evening out with a friend. When she returned a couple of hours later the child was unconscious. The boyfriend confessed to shaking the child to try to calm her down because she wouldn't stop crying no matter what he did.

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<sup>i</sup> Promoting Healthy Families in Your Community 2008 Resource Packet, Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.