



**“Silence is NOT an Option:
A Parent Driven Plan to Keep Our Children Safe at Home and at School”**

Problem:

No child should experience maltreatment, i.e., neglect, abuse, or bullying, including cyber bullying. Unfortunately, children with disabilities, and especially those with communication challenges, experience maltreatment at a rate that is three to four times greater than that experienced by their nondisabled peers.¹ Bullying alone is experienced by as many as one in seven children, with a reported 63% or higher rate among students who have any “label.”² The maltreatment experience significantly impedes children’s ability to interact, learn, communicate, or achieve at a level consistent with their potential.³ While parents and professionals share a moral and legal responsibility to prevent, recognize and report child maltreatment⁴, few are aware of the risk factors, reporting protocols, or most importantly, the prevention strategies that can protect children. Perpetrators rely upon this lack of knowledge to identify, “groom” and maltreat children. Unfortunately, a child’s limited knowledge about what behavior are safe and acceptable and what might cross the line of appropriateness, combined with potential social isolation and immaturity, limited vocabulary, challenges in communication, underdeveloped self advocacy skills, and insufficient understanding of their own emerging sexuality serve to increase the length of time and the impact of their maltreatment experience.

¹ The Risk and Prevention of Maltreatment of Children with Disabilities
(<http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/prevenres/focus/focus.pdf>)

² Bullying Statistics 2010
(<http://www.bullyingstatistics.org/content/bullying-statistics-2010.html>)

³ Awareness & Advocacy to Protect & Prepare Our Children for Social, Emotional, & Academic Success
(<http://deafed-childabuse-neglect-col.wiki.educ.msu.edu/file/view/Key+Note+-+Parents+-+Awareness+%26+Advocacy+to+Protect+and+Prepare+Our.pdf>)

⁴ Child Welfare Information Gateway: State Statues
(http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/)

What can parents do?

Parent Centered Solutions:

YOU can prevent child maltreatment or lessen its length and impact through six critical steps:

1. **Learn:** Do not turn away from a news broadcast, or fail to read a newspaper article, or watch a T.V. show, etc. concerning child neglect, abuse, or bullying. Learning from the experience of others is critical in broadening an understanding of abuse, neglect and bullying.
2. **Talk:** Establish “Safety Rules” with your children from a very young age. Help them know how to get your attention quickly when their safety is at risk. ([View Sara Kennedy’s video on how to have this conversation with your children](#)).
3. **Question:** Ask your child’s teacher how and when your child will be taught how to remain safe from maltreatment and what to do if do if they do not feel safe (see [Childhelp Speak Up Be Safe curriculum](#) & the [Kidpower Resources, Texts & Programs](#) for school and community based prevention programs).
4. **Call:** 1-800-4-A-CHILD [ChildHelp Hotline](#) if you ever suspect a child is being maltreated. This free and confidential call with a Hotline counselor will help you to understand what you have observed or experienced. The counselor will also help you to decide how to effectively act on your suspicions. Parents don’t have to have all the answers about this topic to step in and be a voice for a child in trouble.
5. **Build:** Establish family and school centered safeguards (see below) to insure the safety and success of your children.
6. **Share:** If you are on [Facebook search for the Hands & Voices page](#) and click ‘Like’ to be engaged in an ongoing discussion and access information about this topic that you can incorporate into your child’s IFSP, IEP and 504 documents.

Family Centered Solutions:

The Child Welfare Information Gateway has identified “Six Protective Factors⁵” that prevent child maltreatment. These factors can be learned and supported in families by home intervention programs and parents’ own efforts to learn about them. The six factors are:

1. nurturing and attachment;
2. knowledge of parenting and child development;
3. parental resilience;
4. social connections;
5. concrete supports for parents; and
6. social and emotional competence of children.

⁵ Child Welfare Information Gateway: The Six Protective Factors
(<http://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/preventionmonth/factors.cfm>)

While these factors are already incorporated into most early intervention and early childhood programs, ***few parents or professionals are aware of these issues:***

- a. how the factors serve to prevent child maltreatment of any type;
- b. what situations place children at increased risk for maltreatment;
- c. how to recognize signs in a child's behavior or physical body that indicate maltreatment; or
- d. what to do if they suspect a child has been maltreated.

Some parents and professionals don't connect the critical need for very young children to develop their knowledge of why, when and how they can express their feelings, make choices, or indicate what they want, or do not want to do with skills that will help keep a child safe from maltreatment. This knowledge represents learning, language and self-advocacy skills that both enhance academic achievement and prevent or stop child maltreatment. Perpetrators, whether adults or peers, depend on other adults to be unaware and for children to be compliant (i.e., do what they are told), confused (i.e., is "this" maltreatment?), uncommunicative (i.e., keep "secrets"), and feel guilty (i.e., they somehow "caused" this to happen). Small enhancements in the design of early intervention and early childhood programs (as outlined above) can substantially reduce the risk of maltreatment, while at the same time improving the skills and knowledge for both parents and children. **IFSP documents should spell out the knowledge and skill development needed to prevent maltreatment.**

School Centered Solutions:

Research shows that the more individuals who interact with a child, the more opportunities for maltreatment. "Safe children" are those who:

1. communicate frequently and well with their parents and teachers;
2. are effective self advocates;
3. understand what is acceptable and what is out of bounds in healthy relationships, (or what constitutes "maltreatment");
4. understand their own emerging sexuality;
5. recognize "risky" situations;
6. have practiced how to respond when threatened; and
7. know how and who to tell if they have been harmed.

Given this definition, most children with disabilities and in particular those with significant communication difficulties are not "safe children." To become safe, children must have the needed learning opportunities and support. IEP documents should spell out the knowledge and skill development needed to prevent maltreatment.

How to Include Safety Statements in your child's IFSP/IEP/504?

A possible obstacle an IEP/IFSP team may face is the failure to see how the skills of self-advocacy, awareness and communication concerning maltreatment can be incorporated into a child's IEP/IFSP. Though there is a growing level of attention addressing these skills as they pertain to a student with special needs, many IEP/IFSP teams may have many questions as exactly how to incorporate them into the IEP/IFSP. Please read below for suggestions.

IFSP Statements to Request:

A service goal, or family training, can be added for any area of need in the IFSP or IEP. The IEP can also list accommodations and modifications. To address strengthening a child's protective factors to decrease the risk for maltreatment, the IFSP or IEP team can add variations on the following.

- Knowledge of protective factors: (See" 1-6" above "Family Centered Solutions")
 - Can parents demonstrate the concrete actions that will protect a very young child, such as asking for background checks for agency and childcare personnel, taking the time to really know a child's caregivers as well as making impromptu visits while a child is in someone else's care, and the importance of remaining alert and aware for changes in a child's behavior?
 - Parents can learn about the concept of "grooming", or the idea that that potential perpetrators work to gain the trust of a child and family over months and years of time, and understand how a child's hearing loss may contribute to maltreatment without targeted support for the family to learn about nurturing, modeling the ability to set boundaries with others from a young age, (whether known or unknown to the child), early self-advocacy skills, and proactive communication skills.

Example: Child will give clear nonverbal, signed or spoken "no" to uncomfortable interaction through role play and real life activities followed by appropriate parent response to that "no." including an explanation when interaction is necessary for health or safety of child. (e.g., medical visits, hygiene.)

- Parents can describe physical and emotional signs of suspected abuse or neglect in a very young child.
- Parents will understand the methods to report suspected abuse or neglect for any child.

To further assist the IFSP (and later the IEP) team discussion, see the Safety Attachment form that can provide a structured discussion about what a child may need to be safe.

IEP or 504 Statements to Request:

For a school age child, services, goals, accommodations or modifications can be added into the IEP or 504 Plan, including the Communication Plan to support a child's personal safety as outlined in number "1-7" "School Centered Solutions" above. If your state does not have a Communication Plan, refer to the Special Considerations for a child who is deaf or hard of hearing, found in the federal IDEA law for comparable language. See the Safety Attachment for more detail.

From the list of "School Centered Solutions," i.e., 1-7 above, the first item highlights the need for a student to communicate frequently and well with parents and teachers.

- A goal with an attached service could be added to the IEP to address a student being able to share not just basic needs but his or her reactions and thoughts about the school day with one to two trusted adults and peers within a circle of support, including making friends, pragmatic social language skills like taking turns, seeking clarification, sharing personal information, and using humor appropriately. If a student can communicate using these skills, risk for maltreatment substantially declines.
- In relation to number 2, regarding students who are good self-advocates being more safe, a student on a 504 Plan may need a goal to participate in a self advocacy workshop series where students learn to describe their particular hearing loss, how they learn best, and how to ask for accommodations such as preferential seating, note taking, and clarification of assignments in preparation for entering the adult world and using the ADA laws to ensure equal access. At the heart of self-advocacy is the sense of self that leads a child to speak up on his or her on behalf for better access. If a child learns that ability, they can also learn to speak up when they feel a line of appropriate behavior has been crossed, and potentially stop a worsening of maltreatment before it proceeds.
- How does a student who is potentially socially isolated or perhaps even sheltered know that is acceptable behavior within healthy relationships as listed in number 3 above? A goal could read: "Given a variety of scenarios, the student can identify elements of healthy and unhealthy relationships of peers or children/ adult pairs, recognizing red flags of unequal or inappropriate relationships and describing first steps to change the balance of power. (methods: role plays, stories in film and literature, topical news stories.)"

For each characteristic of a "safe" student, a goal, service, accommodation, or staff or parent counseling and training goal can be written for students in need. For any concerns that schools or agencies have about "non-academic" goals, parents can share the information in IDEA related to the purpose of special education: "to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free and appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living." If our students are at three to four times more risk of maltreatment, services and goals directed at improving their safety *is* meeting their unique needs. While academic achievement is a more common measure, social emotional and self advocacy needs are also a critical factor. (Seattle School District v B.S., 9th Circuit, and other case law supports this concept.)

Sections of the IDEA and OSEP letters which support this document and the inclusion of safety conversations in the development of IFSTP/IEPS.

- 20 U.S.C 1414(d)(3)(A)(ii) – development of IEP must address ‘the concern of the parents for enhancing the education of their child’.
- 20 U.S.C.1414 (d)(3)(B)(iv) – Special Considerations for Deaf children must consider ‘full range of needs.’
- 34 CFR 300.34 (c)(14)(iv)(v) - Related services section – social work services section includes mobilizing school and community resources to enable the child to learn as effectively as possible in his or her educational program; and assisting in developing positive behavioral intervention strategies.
- Letter to Clarke, 48 IDELR 77 (OSEP 2007) – clarification that educational performance as used in the IDEA and its implementing regulations is not limited to academic performance.

Key Resources for Parent Learning:

- What article can I share with family and friends to explain the maltreatment of children with disabilities?

[“Protecting the Most Vulnerable From Abuse”](#)

[\(www.asha.org/Publications/leader/2012/121120/Protecting-the-Most-Vulnerable-From-Abuse.htm\)](http://www.asha.org/Publications/leader/2012/121120/Protecting-the-Most-Vulnerable-From-Abuse.htm)

- How can you know if a child is being maltreated?
[Recognizing child abuse and neglect: Child & Parent Signs & Symptoms.](#)
[\(https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/whatiscan.pdf\)](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/whatiscan.pdf)
- Why are children with disabilities at greater risk for maltreatment?
[Knowledge Base Concerning the Risk & Prevention of Maltreatment of Children with Disabilities.](#)
[\(http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/prevenres/focus/focus.pdf\)](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/prevenres/focus/focus.pdf)
- What can schools do to keep children safe?
[Childhelp "Speak Up Be Safe" – Grades 1-6 Curriculum](#)
[\(http://www.speakupbesafe.org/\)](http://www.speakupbesafe.org/)

[The Kidpower Book for Caring Parents](#) and the bullying and abuse prevention resources at
[\(http://www.kidpower.org/\)](http://www.kidpower.org/)
- Why does bullying occur and what can you do to stop it?
[PACER: National Bullying Prevention Center](#)
[\(http://www.pacer.org/bullying/\)](http://www.pacer.org/bullying/)

[Understanding Bullying: Center for disease Control & Prevention](#)

http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/Bullying_Factsheet-a.pdf

- Who are the parents and professionals working to keep our children safe?
The "[Bright Spots](#)" of the Hands & Voices [OUR Children Project](#)"
<http://deafed-childabuse-neglect-col.wiki.educ.msu.edu/Bright+Spot+-+Home+Page>