

Bennett, S. & Baladerian, N. (2005). Children with disabilities and child maltreatment. *The Link: ISPCAN*, 14(2), 1,8.

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“Among child maltreatment research literature, relatively few articles focus on children with disabilities. Lack of data contributes to the ongoing lack of awareness of maltreatment and severely limits an informed response to these issues. Children with disabilities, seen in terms of their impairment and not as unique human beings, are vulnerable to maltreatment by their caregivers and peers.”

“For children with disabilities...impairments may make it difficult to participate in family and community activities, leading to social isolation. They are more likely to be living outside birth families in foster care, group homes or large institutions, which can mean they are more vulnerable to abuse. Having more caregivers provides a greater probability of encountering one who is abusive, whilst being separated from potential sources of protection. These children may be unable to protest or report when boundaries are crossed during intimate body care. Children with disabilities and their parents/caregivers often have limited access to critical information pertaining to personal safety and sexual abuse prevention.”

“Barriers to effective prevention of abuse towards children with disabilities exist at all stages of the protection process. There is sometimes a reluctance to believe that children with disabilities could be abused, and main presentations of abuse can be misinterpreted. Bruises from physical abuse may be interpreted as accidental. Changes in behavior may be attributed to their on-going impairment. Children with intellectual or communication differences are vulnerable to being ignored, disbelieved or misunderstood when they report abuse. Communication in non-standard forms often lacks the signs or words relating to sex or body parts.”

“Social workers lacking familiarity with a child’s impairment may rely on those in close contact with the child to interpret & explain behaviors or symptoms during an assessment, rather than working with an independent professional who can communicate with the child. The difficulty of finding substitute care may also prevent professionals from taking appropriate action to protect the child. A full assessment would include communication with the child using their preferred method, interviews with all the caregivers and specialists, and a review of all case files held by the service providers. Additional time, however, is often not available for this within existing systems and procedures.”

“Many cases do not proceed to the criminal justice system because of a common assumption that children with disabilities will not be able to give credible evidence or withstand the rigors of the court process.”

Recommendations for the Prevention of Maltreatment in Children with Disabilities

“All agencies involved in the abuse response system should receive training regarding working with children with disabilities. Parents and other caregivers need to have training in the identification and reporting of maltreatment in children with disabilities. The children need to be educated on how to protect themselves and how, and to whom, to report maltreatment if it occurs.”

“Integrated multi-agency data collection within the child protection system is necessary to quantify the problem, identify areas of need, guide the development of services and evaluate the outcomes of interventions or reforms. Reporting forms must uniformly identify whether the victim has a disability and define the presence and type of disability.”