

False Abuse Allegations, Adoption, and Foster Care

Why False Allegations Occur

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The first version of this checklist appeared in the book: "Adopting and Advocating for the Special Needs Child," by L. Anne Babb and Rita Laws (Greenwood Press). This list is not complete, but meant to be a starting point.

Being accused of child abuse when you are innocent is a nightmare that many cannot comprehend who have not lived it. False abuse allegation is a life-shattering catastrophe. And it happens to foster and adoptive parents all the time.

Why? Because many of the kids they care for have emotional, mental and behavioral problems. Some of them will use false abuse accusations as a weapon or a tool to get their way. A few are just trying to get attention. Since some of them have been abused in the past by former caregivers, the details of their accusations can sound very convincing.

What Parents Can Do: A Checklist

There are several things adoptive and foster parents can do to protect themselves from false abuse allegations while also protecting their children:

- Children who have been sexually abused are more likely to become victims again. Even if a child has a history of making false allegations, always take new allegations seriously! The child may truly become a victim of sexual abuse again. It is the duty of the foster or adoptive parent, working with professionals, to protect the child and give her or him functional boundaries and self-protective strategies.
- If a child accuses someone else in the household of abuse, make sure these two people are not alone again, or have access to one another, until the investigation is completed and professional recommendations are made. Otherwise, you could be held responsible for failing to protect a child after an allegation.
- If you have been falsely accused, seriously consider calling an attorney for help, but only one that has experience with such matters. You need expert advice.
- Before an older child is placed into your family, write the placing agency and specifically ask that any history of emotional, physical or sexual abuse of the child be documented in writing. If the child has had several placements since protective removal from an abusive situation, also ask whether the child has ever made false abuse allegations. Insist on a written response.
- If a child has a history of false abuse allegations, ask the child's worker to write a letter stating the allegations, circumstances, and how the allegations proved to be unfounded. Keep this letter in a safe place in case you ever have to show that the child has a pattern of disrupting placements through such allegations. Keep a copy in your car and give one to the school counselor or pre-school director, and one to the child's therapist. If the child's previous false abuse allegations involved dialing

911 or the police, take a copy of the letter to the local police department. This will not prevent investigation, of course, but will make any future abuse investigations less stressful for you.

- Talk with the child and his or her therapist openly about his or her history of being abused, and of making false allegations. Tell the child that you plan to protect him or her and yourself.
- Immediately enlist the help of a competent professional experienced with abuse survivors and foster or adoptive family therapy. You and the child will need ongoing therapeutic support from a person who knows you well.
- If a child is sexually reactive, acts out sexually, or has provocative behavior, the adults and older children in the household should be sure to have another adult nearby or in the same room for the protection of the parent and the child.
- Never use physical punishment with children who have survived abuse. There are always alternatives to spanking.
- If an out-of-control child needs to be restrained or held, do so only if the child's immediate safety is threatened. Get help as soon as you can and only restrain a child until he or she regains some control. And never restrain a child if you haven't been trained in proper restraint techniques. At least one adopted child has been killed while his much larger and stronger adoptive parent restrained him.
- If you are accused, tape-record or have a credible witness to every single conversation with abuse investigators. Keep a detailed journal of everything that happens from the moment the allegation is made to its resolution. This is essential because it is important that parents not be misunderstood, misquoted, or have their words confused with those made by another accused person. If an abuse investigator asks to speak to a parent, that person should immediately reach for a tape recorder, or inform the investigator that it will be necessary first for a neighbor, friend, or some other witness to be present. This protects everyone and fosters accuracy in the investigation. The recorded tapes should be kept by the parent in a safe place, or the witness should be asked to take live notes, or to later write down what he or she remembers from the conversation.
- It can be especially helpful for parents to have a professional, such as their attorney or family therapist, accompany them to the interview with officials. If parents are accused of child abuse or neglect in court, being able to produce credible witnesses of the parents' responsible behavior will go a long way to supporting the parents and disabling the adopted child's attempt to undermine the adoption.