



Abuse of Persons with *Disabilities* Information Sheet

Get Help

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, phone 911.

If you suspect that a child is being abused, neglected or exposed to family violence, phone your local Child and Family Services Authority, the 24-hour Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-387-KIDS (5437) or the police.

If you suspect someone is being abused in a care facility, phone the toll-free Protection for Persons in Care Reporting Line at 1-888-357-9339.

For family violence resources in your community, phone the 24-hour Family Violence Info Line at 310-1818, toll-free in Alberta, or visit www.familyviolence.alberta.ca.

Alberta Children and Youth Services is proud to lead Alberta's Prevention of Family Violence and Bullying Initiative.

Did you know...

According to some studies, persons with disabilities are 50 per cent more likely to be victims of violence or abuse.¹

What is a disability?

A disability is any limitation that significantly affects a person's mobility, agility, sight, hearing, verbal communication or intellectual functioning. It also includes limitations arising from psychological, emotional or mental health issues.

What is family violence?

Family violence is the abuse of power within relationships of family, trust or dependency that endangers the survival, security or well-being of another person. It can include many forms of abuse including spouse abuse, senior abuse and neglect, child abuse and neglect, child sexual abuse, parent abuse and witnessing abuse of others in the family. Family violence may include some or all of the following behaviours: physical abuse, psychological abuse, criminal harassment/stalking, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, financial abuse and spiritual abuse.²

Family violence, also called abuse, almost never happens "just once." Once an act of violence occurs, a barrier has been broken and the risk of further abuse is higher.

To an outside observer who is not aware of what goes on behind closed doors, family violence may appear to be an isolated incident. In fact, family violence happens over months and years. As it continues, it almost always becomes more frequent and more severe.

It can happen to anyone

Abuse can happen to anyone with any level of ability, female or male, young or old, poor or rich. It can happen in heterosexual, same-sex or LGBTQ* relationships, long- or short-term relationships and between people who live together or separately. Abuse happens in cities, towns, villages, rural areas, isolated communities, reserves and settlements. However, persons with disabilities may be more at risk of abuse than other persons because of:

- the nature of the disability
- myths and stereotypes about persons with disabilities
- dependency
- isolation.

* Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, trans-identified, two-spirited and queer identities.

What are some signs of abuse?

Not every person who is abused will have all of these symptoms, but watch for a pattern of symptoms. This could indicate abuse. People who are abused may show some of these signs:

- destructive behaviour
- high levels of anxiety, especially when asked to go to a certain place or accompany a specific person
- constant apologies
- extreme behaviour, such as aggressiveness or submissiveness
- unexplained physical injuries such as bruises, burns, cuts, scratches, broken bones or bite marks
- a significant change in sexual behaviour or attitude
- inappropriate sexual behaviour
- reduced mental alertness or physical ability (often due to over- or under-medication)
- heightened, reduced or absent response to medication (indicating the medication has not been used as directed)
- poor hygiene
- unattended medical or dental needs
- inappropriate clothing for the weather
- under- or overweight when not associated with medication
- unexplained frequent hospitalizations.

Who abuses persons with disabilities?

People they know

Persons with disabilities, like other victims of family violence, are most often abused by people they know. This may be a caregiver in the person's residence, a spouse or common-law partner, another family member or a professional with whom they have some contact as a patient or client.

Sometimes abuse goes both ways

In some cases, abuse is directed by one person against another, and in other cases, parties are abusive to one another. The issue of persons with disabilities sometimes being abusive to caregivers or other family members has been identified.³

Four things you can do if you are abused

1. **Tell someone about what is happening.** If the person you tell is not helpful, tell someone else. Keep telling until you find someone who is helpful. The more people who know about the abuse, the more likely someone will be able to help.
2. **Protect yourself.**
 - **If you are in immediate danger, phone 911.**
 - **If someone is hurting or scaring you, phone the police.**
 - If there is physical abuse, you may be able to arrange for an emergency protection order or other court order to stop an abusive person from contacting you. The police may be able to help.
 - **Protect yourself from medication abuse.** Arrange for someone who doesn't live with you to know about your medications. Arrange for this person to visit sometimes.

- **Be aware that ending an abusive relationship is often dangerous.** That does not mean you should stay in it, it means you need to take extra care to be safe.
3. **Make a safety plan.** Phone the 24-hour Family Violence Info Line at **310-1818**, toll-free in Alberta, to ask who in your community could help you develop a safety plan.
 4. **Build on your strength.** Changing an abusive situation can be difficult. Be proud of yourself for taking action.

Six things you can do if you suspect someone is being abused

1. **Watch** for signs of abuse listed under "What are some signs of abuse?"
2. **Check** your concerns with someone who knows about family violence. Ask for suggestions.
3. **Talk** to the person if you see signs of abuse. For example, you could say, "I've noticed that you seem upset lately, and I wonder if something is bothering you."
4. **Understand** that the person may not realize it is abuse. Many abused people do not know they are experiencing abuse, especially by someone they live with or someone who provides care.
5. **Encourage** the person to contact community organizations for help.
6. **Report** your suspicions of abuse to local police.

Help and hope

Abuse of persons with disabilities is a serious problem, but there is help and hope.

Resources

Health Link: A registered nurse answers questions and gives health advice and information. Phone **1-866-408-LINK (5465)**, toll-free, 24 hours a day, or visit www.healthlinkalberta.ca.

Child Disability Resource Link: Gives callers information about services and supports available for a child. Phone **1-866-346-4661**, toll-free, Monday to Friday from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., and Saturday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The Bullying Prevention Helpline: Trained counsellors give callers information and strategies on bullying prevention. Phone **1-888-456-2323**, toll-free in Alberta, 24 hours a day.

Alberta Committee of Citizens with Disabilities (ACCD) promotes full participation in society for Albertans with disabilities. Phone **1-800-387-2514**, toll-free, or visit www.accd.net.

1. Government of Canada. (2005). *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile*, p. 78. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/85-224-XIE/85-224-XIE2005000.pdf>

2. Alberta Children's Services. (2005). *Alberta Roundtable on Family Violence and Bullying: Finding Solutions Together*, p. 2. Edmonton, AB, Alberta Children's Services. http://www.child.alberta.ca/home/documents/familyviolence/rpt_opfvb_finding_solutions_high.pdf

3. Alberta Committee of Citizens with Disabilities (ACCD). (2002). *Violence Against Women with Disabilities*, p. 44. Retrieved August 2007 from the Alberta Committee of Citizens with Disabilities website: http://www.accd.net/publications/Projects_and_Research/2002_Violence_Against_Women_With_Disabilities.pdf