

# Choose Your Partner Carefully

## *Your child's life depends on it.....*

**78 % of Child Deaths** investigated by Cuyahoga County in 2008 and 2009 were caused by a mother's partner; often, the boyfriend or step-father of the child.

When choosing your partner, you are not just choosing for yourself. You are choosing for your child, too! Your partner plays an important role in your child's life. Choosing the wrong partner can be deadly.

Violence affects children from every income level and race. Each year, thousands of children end up seriously injured or killed nationally.

**No matter how much you may love your partner, no matter what his feelings for you might be.....he may not love your child.**

*It is important that you know the warning signs.*

## Warning Signs

Sometimes, when you are in love, you can miss the warning signs. One of the most important signs to look for is how your child acts when left alone with your partner. Is your child afraid every time you leave? Does he or she cry often? Shake with fear? Has your child begun to show new behaviors like bed-wetting, thumb sucking, being clingy to you, or crying often when you leave the room?

*Other questions you should ask yourself. Does your partner:*

- get easily angered or short-tempered when talking to you or your child?
- demand constant attention?
- deliver harsh punishment for minor misbehaviors?
- show anger or impatience when your child cries or throws a tantrum?
- call your child names or put down your child?
- think it is funny to scare your child?
- stop you and your child from attending family events?
- make all the decisions for you and your child?
- say you are a bad parent and not strict enough?
- hurt your child and blame you?
- handle guns and knives around you or your child?
- does your partner think your child is a problem?
- prevent or make it difficult for you and your child to be with friends and family?
- moved you and your child away from family and friends?

If you have answered yes to even a few of these questions, your child could be at risk.

**Never ignore the warning signs!**

Spend time watching your partner with your child before leaving them alone together. Watch the interaction. Make sure your child is comfortable. How does your partner respond to normal child behavior? If your child is very young, can your partner understand what your child needs?

Be a role model for your child! If your partner is abusing you, there is a chance he will abuse your child. Learn to recognize abuse and take action to help your child.

**If you have to, choose your child over your partner.**

## **The Facts**

Far too often, a child is abused or even killed when left in the care of a mother's partner, usually a boyfriend (who is typically not the biological father).

In 2005, a study, published in the November issue of *Pediatrics*, found that children who live with adults who are not biologically related to them are nearly 50 times as likely to die of inflicted injuries as children living with two biological parents.

In 2009, a study, published in the August issue of *Pediatrics* found that 83% of beating/shaking injuries causing the death of the child were at the hands of mother's partner. In more than half of these incidents, he gave a false story to explain the injuries. Previous abuse was suspected in at least half of these cases.

## **Why**

**Many non-biological partners have no relationship or commitment to the child. They are primarily interested in their own romantic involvement with the mother and become irritated when problems with the child arise. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the common circumstances for a child's death are the child being at home, being alone with the mother's partner, and crying.**

40% of babies born in the United States are born to single women and living arrangements are often casual. Many of these mothers lack childcare but need to work in order to keep their public assistance benefits. Instead of seeking a qualified childcare center or person to care for their children, mothers are leaving them with their partner. Not only do the partners often times have no relationship with the child, they have even less patience and maturity.

### **Top 4 Risk Factors Associated with Child Deaths**

1. Family history of domestic violence or child abuse
2. Gun access
3. Poverty
4. History of substance abuse

# Characteristics of Abusive Adults

Adults who abuse a child/ children will often share several of the following characteristics.

**Substance Abuse:** Studies have shown a direct relationship between drugs and/or alcohol and the occurrence of abuse.

**History of Abuse as a Child:** Children learn from adults. A child who is raised in a home where violence is used to solve problems will likely react in the same way.

**Isolation:** The adult lacks the physical and emotional support they need from friends, family and their community. He or she will rarely participate in activities.

**Poor self-concept:** The adult sees himself or herself as worthless, bad or unlovable.

**Immaturity:** The adult can be easily irritated and overwhelmed by everyday problems.

**Lack of parenting skills:** The adult does not understand a child's needs and often feels the child is being disobedient when he or she is not able to meet the adults expectation.

**Unmet emotional needs:** The adult has difficulty showing warmth, love and support and are unable to provide the child with these feelings.

## Abusive Adults may

- be rigid
- be mean
- be easily angered
- be demanding
- be irrational
- be incapable of child rearing
- believe in the need for harsh physical discipline
- react to the child with impatience or annoyance
- not show affection/ concern towards the child
- crave power
- have mental health problems

# Types of Abuse

**Physical Abuse:** The non-accidental injury to a child. Excessive physical discipline is abuse. Physical discipline is probably excessive if:

- it results in physical injury, including bruises
- punishment is used to instill fear, not educate
- the adult loses control during discipline
- it is inappropriate for the age of the child
- it is the result of unrealistic expectations or demands on the child

**Examples of physical abuse are:** hitting, kicking, choking, pinching, hair pulling, burning, shaking, using (or threatening to use) a weapon.

## Distinguishing Accidental Injury from Abuse

**Where is the injury?** Injury on the child's knees, elbows, shins and forehead are all parts of the body, which can be injured during an accidental fall or bump.

Injury to the back, thighs, genitals, buttocks, back of the legs or face are less likely to be the result of normal age related activity.

**What is the size and shape of the injury?** Many non-accidental injuries are inflicted with familiar objects: a belt, hairbrush, stick, board, extension cord or rope. The marks, which bear resemblance to the above object, are non-accidental.

The more injuries the child has, the more reason for concern. Injuries in different stages of healing can suggest a pattern of abuse.

## Punishment or Abuse

Is your partner abusing your child and calling it punishment? Learn to recognize the difference between punishment and abuse. **Choose your child over your partner.**

Punishment can be considered abusive when it causes injury, becomes excessive, and creates what Ohio law calls "substantial risk of serious physical harm" to the child.

Punishment is probably excessive if:

- the child has a physical injury (bruising, broken skin, swelling, or any situation that requires medical attention)
- it is meant to instill fear rather than to educate
- the adult loses control
- the action is inappropriate for the child's age

Wondering if the punishment has gone too far? Ask the following questions:

- Does the adult feel good about this action?
- Is there an important lesson to teach?
- Does the child know that he or she is loved?
- Is there mutual respect, or is there fear?
- Is the adult behaving in a way that they would want the child to behave?

Many experts say an authoritative parenting style is best. That is when the child knows the adult is in charge and he/she respects, **but does not** fear the adult. Talk with the child about expectations, and decide together firm and appropriate consequences for misbehavior.

**Verbal/ Emotional Abuse:** Chronic attitude or acts, which interfere with the psychological and social development of a child. When the adult does not provide the praise, nurturance, love or security a child needs for healthy development.

**Examples of Verbal/ Emotional Abuse:** Name- calling and put-downs, yelling screaming, insulting, intentionally embarrassing the child in front of other people, making the child feel responsible for the violence.

**Sexual Abuse:** Any act of a sexual nature upon or with a child.

**Examples of Sexual Abuse Against Children:**

- any sexual act with a child age 12 or younger regardless of whether the child says it was consensual
- when an adult, age 18 or older, has sexual contact with a child, ages 13-15, who is four or more years younger, regardless of whether the child says it was consensual
- rape, which includes vaginal, oral or anal penetration by a body part or object, either forced or under threat of force
- unwanted kissing or touching of private parts
- exposing private parts to a child
- viewing pornography or exchanging photos or video of nude children or children engaged in sexual acts

**What to Know about Child Sex Abuse**

Child sex abusers are usually people that the child or family knows well – your boyfriend, a family member, neighbor or close friend. Be cautious about “stranger danger” messages that may keep a child from talking to you about someone they know who is harming them.

Sex abusers often “groom” victims by forming loving relationships with them over a long period of time. It is never too early to tell a child that no one has the right to touch them if they do not want to be touched. This includes loving touches from parents, grandparents, friends and family members. Remind adults to respect a child’s decision if they do not want to be tickled, kissed, hugged or touched – for any reason. In addition, sexual contact with a child should never be confused as “playful.”

Limit one-on-one time that your child has with any other adult, including people you know well. If another adult, such as a boyfriend, is spending one-on-one time with your child, drop in unexpectedly as frequently as you can.

Understand why a child may not tell you if someone is hurting them. Abusers often shame children or tell children that his or her mother will be angry if they find out. The abuser is often manipulative and may try to confuse the child about what is right or wrong. The child may be worried that the abuser will harm you if you find out.

Lastly, remember that it is very rare for a child to lie about sexual abuse. If a child tells you something that seems suspicious, it is important for you to BELIEVE the child unconditionally. Do not blame or shame the child for an act that was committed against them. Contact a professional, such as the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center hotline at 216-619-6192, for information and support about how to help a child.

## Community Resources

There are many online and community resources for mothers who may need assistance in obtaining services. Some are listed below.

- To report child abuse and neglect, contact Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services at 216-696-KIDS or [www.cuyahogacounty.us](http://www.cuyahogacounty.us)
- For childcare information, contact Starting Point at 216-575-0061 or <http://starting-point.org>
- For parenting resources contact First Call for Help at 216-436-2000 or [www.211cleveland.org](http://www.211cleveland.org)
- For supportive services for children under the age of three and their families, contact Help Me Grow of Cuyahoga County at 216-736-4300 or [www.helpmegrow.org](http://www.helpmegrow.org)
- For domestic violence, teen dating violence services for adults, teens and children, contact Domestic Violence Center's Helpline at 216-391-HELP (4357) or [www.domesticviolencecenter.org](http://www.domesticviolencecenter.org)
- For questions about sexual abuse or to request help following sexual abuse or rape, call Cleveland Rape Crisis Center 24-hour hotline at 216-619-6192 or [www.clevelandrapecrisis.org](http://www.clevelandrapecrisis.org)
- For temporary safe housing for children and support services for parents contact Providence House at 216-651-5982 or [www.provhouse.org](http://www.provhouse.org)