

False Allegations:

Helping Group Members Understand, Avoid, and Survive Them

False allegations of abuse and neglect disrupt family life and can rock the stability of even the firmest foundations. Allegations not only affect the accuser and the accused, but also spouses or partners, other children in the family, extended family members, friends, group members, and others in the community. They are difficult to endure because they can cause the removal of children from the home, public shame and humiliation, strain in a family, and more.

As a parent group leader, you probably already know that false allegations of abuse and neglect are affecting the lives of many foster and adoptive parents across North America. Many parent group members are finding that their children's past traumas sometimes make it difficult for their children to trust them or form a healthy attachment. In the process of learning how to trust and love their new families, some children unknowingly or even intentionally falsely accuse new family members of abusing them.

Why Children Might Falsely Accuse Parents

Many experts believe there are clear reasons why children who were abused in the past might falsely accuse their new foster or adoptive parents of abuse. Below are four reasons adapted from authors Frank Kunstal, a licensed psychologist who has treated seriously disturbed children from the foster care system and their families for many years, and Brenda McCreight, family therapist and adoption expert. Kunstal and McCreight both believe families are sometimes targets of false allegations because children who have been abused:

- are fearful of intimate relationships. Forming an intimate bond with another person can be one of the most threatening acts for a child who has lived with abuse. Kunstal believes that maltreated kids see all families as potential abusers and can be extremely wary and untrusting of their new family. A healthy family that begins to bond with a maltreated child may scare the child into wanting to push them away.
- are hurt and angry. Children are sometimes defiant to help them feel powerful and in control. They can defy a parent who won't let them do something they want to do, such as staying up late, using the car, or getting a tattoo and then may falsely accuse parents of abuse as part of the defiance.
- can have confused memories. Many children have vague or blocked memories of their early childhood, possibly because they were too young to remember or were traumatized by the abuse. A familiar family incident, such as an argument, can trigger terror in a child and unleash blocked memories, and the child may even insert the face of the only parent he now knows into that memory.
- sometimes misinterpret an incident as abuse. McCreight cautions parents that, based on past experiences, the child may view the back rub you gave him as a seductive move, or believe it was not an accident when you tripped and spilled tea on her arm.

Take All Allegations Seriously

As child advocates, foster and adoptive parents need to take all allegations seriously and support a thorough investigation of each reported incident. Children who have been abused in the past are at greater risk for becoming victims again and need adults to work together to help keep them safe.

Kunstal believes that families are the only true therapists for children who are trying to form a primary attachment and therefore are key to the success of helping their children heal. Kunstal also insists that parents should learn to be proactive to avoid allegations, not only to protect themselves, but also to protect the therapeutic relationship they have with their children. Parents who are prepared, yet unable to avoid an allegation, will hopefully endure the incident without letting it destroy them or their family.

Rick Tsukada, a therapist and social worker for Casey Family Services, has found that sometimes the path toward healing includes surviving an allegation and then asking the child to rejoin the family. Some children need to test how much a parent can take before they learn to trust, believe the parent loves them, and dare to love back.

Helping Members Avoid an Allegation

It is important for you as a leader to encourage your group members to protect themselves and their families from allegations. Think about revisiting the allegations topic quarterly to keep it fresh in people's minds and to make sure new parents are informed. Plan for future meeting time to encourage group members to:

- become knowledgeable about your area's child protection laws, county or agency procedures for investigation, and resources available to families. Your group could compile this information and make packets for new members.
- get written documentation of any prior instances of physical or sexual abuse or false allegations their

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child may have made against other caregivers in the past. Find adults in your area who have documented their own child's past and ask if they can come to a meeting to offer tips to your members.

- develop a team approach with their social worker, pediatrician, psychologist or psychiatrist and check to see if they have experience with abuse survivors (or are willing to learn) and understand their child's history. Your group could devote a couple of meetings to gathering educational resources for your team members. The group could identify important topics and assign each member something to research, and compile the information for all members to use.
- know and accept their child's vulnerabilities. Devote group time for parents to write down their child's vulnerabilities, behavioral patterns, and triggers.
- participate in family therapy with their child. Their child is learning to bond with the family, and individual therapy alone may prevent that from happening.
- discuss all problems openly with their children and don't keep secrets. Parents should talk about their children's history of abuse and past false allegations and tell their children they plan to protect them and everyone in the family.
- set clearly defined family rules, behavioral expectations, and consequences for misbehavior. Take group time to discuss rules and consequences that have worked and learn from each other.
- create a paper trail by documenting significant family incidents as they happen. Allow group time for parents to bring journals and get started. Instruct members to share this information with their family doctor, therapist, and social worker, etc.

Role Playing an Allegation Experience

A good way to prepare your group members for an allegation (especially if no one has experienced one) is to practice role playing what an allegation might be like from different points of view. A small group can get together before the meeting to write up index cards with each role and background information. Examples of roles are the accuser, the accused person, spouse or partner, friend, group member, sibling, foster child, neighbor, or social worker, etc.

Set aside meeting time to role play various allegation scenarios that could happen to families. The advantage of role playing—while it may seem artificial—is that it

is not a real situation and members can allow themselves to freely express their tension and feelings without hurting anyone else.

Role play for a predetermined amount of time, maybe 5 to 10 minutes, then discuss reactions and feelings that emerge. You can also have group members take turns playing different roles to experience how each person is affected by the allegation. When the group is done let people informally discuss what they learned.

After the discussion, generate a list of what group members learned and look for common themes. After you have identified themes, develop a list of strategies for how your group could help families deal with allegations. Maybe you want to offer training, or set up a system to assign a mentor or a team of mentors to a family experiencing an allegation. Maybe you want to develop a list of preventative strategies for parents to follow to avoid an allegation.

Providing Support to Members

If one of your members is faced with an allegation, it is important for the group to support the family, but also to stay neutral and not take sides. By listening and providing a sounding board for each issue that arises, the group can help the family cope with crisis, think about options, deal with grief, and make careful decisions.

Support Outside of Meetings

A group with experienced members—possibly members who have experienced an allegation—could organize a team of mentors to help members who are facing an allegation. The mentors can work in pairs to avoid taking on the sole responsibility of helping a fellow group member. Mentors can offer support as needed outside the group, thereby reducing or eliminating the need to use too much group time to discuss the allegation.

Your group can also seek training opportunities through your county, local agencies, or social service organizations to help the mentors learn how to provide support and remain neutral. If no one from your group has experienced an allegation, seek out community

Ghosts of the Past

Another reason [allegations] can happen is that the children we adopt often have backgrounds of abuse. The child has a narrow perspective on how the system works, and he may not have witnessed any actual punishment for his real offender(s). He may know that after he reported real abuse, he was moved. So, if your angry, acting-out, unattached twelve-year-old is mad because you won't let him pierce his nose, he may very well decide to report you for abuse. From his limited understanding of the world, the only thing that will happen is that he will go to another family where he will have a better chance at keeping the nose ring. He won't understand that you will experience heartache, public humiliation, the possible removal of your other children, social ostracization, the possible loss of your job, collapse of your marriage, false imprisonment, or a number of other consequences.

—from *Parenting Your Older Adopted Child* by Brenda McCreight

members with expertise on allegations (a psychologist, social worker, or president of your local foster care association) who might provide training for your group.

Structuring Meeting Support

The emotions surrounding an allegation can put an entire parent group into a crisis mode. Many groups have become burdened, divided, immobilized, and unable to complete group tasks because of an allegation against a group member. As a group leader, you not only care about your individual members, but you care about the group's ability to function and follow through with its mission. It is a leader's responsibility to set the tone and help the group decide how to handle allegations, support members, and maintain the group's focus.

When a family's pain surrounding an allegation engulfs the group's meeting time, the group can handle the problem by using the following three steps:

- Vent—The first meeting after the initial allegation parents may be in shock and might need to use most of the group time to tell what happened.
- Problem solve—The second meeting after the allegation parents might again need ample time to discuss new information, process their feelings and get assistance from the group. The group can make suggestions, remind parents of their rights, and offer the resource packet your group compiled earlier.
- Seek outside help—By the third meeting, if the family is still in crisis they should speak up like anyone

else in the group, but their allegation should not be allowed to take over the meeting. The group can also offer suggestions of good therapists, social workers, and lawyers who might be able to help them.

When an Allegation Is Found to be False

Many falsely accused adults have said they felt treated as if they are guilty even before an investigation. Family members, neighbors, and people in the community who were aware of the allegation often prejudged them. Accused adults (especially foster parents) are also sometimes cut off from the support of their social worker and other agency or county staff. Some adults watched friends drift away, and lost jobs and the respect they had in their community. It is almost impossible for an innocent person receiving that much social pressure not to take on shame or guilt. Some adults become depressed and pull away from all of their support systems. Some excellent parents leave their support groups, give up foster care, or parent their children in seclusion because of the suspicions they feel from others.

When an allegation is proven false, it is not an instant happy ending for the family. The family can begin to heal—but, depending on the damage that was done, such as the removal of children from their homes—it might take a long time. The family will need the patient support of the group through a healing process that can take months or even years. Sometimes the most helpful support a group can give is to listen.

When an Allegation Is Substantiated

Unfortunately some parents abuse their children. A substantiated allegation where a parent caused the bruises on her child as she restrained him during a violent outburst might steer the court to recommend the parent be offered more training, support services and respite care, as well as continued involvement in the support group.

Other cases may be more serious and require the parent to separate from the child and seek mental health treatment. If group members are uncomfortable continuing to provide support to a parent, they may have to tell the person to find professional help outside the group. Although this may be hard to do, group members have to decide what is right for their group. Some people need extensive professional help well beyond what a parent group can offer. When you tell people you are not the one who can help them, you might nudge them to seek the help they really need.

Reuniting after an Allegation

Groups can be especially helpful to family members who are reuniting after an allegation. Each family member may feel tentative as they begin to resolve feelings and make peace with the past. A parent group can be of tremendous help during this process when they listen, witness, and report improvements they see in family relationships. They can act as cheerleaders for family successes, redirect parents or children when they over-react, and offer respite to parents who need time alone. The support of a group can sometimes be the determining factor for family success after reunification.

Resources

Books

Parenting Your Adopted Older Child, Brenda McCreight, Ph.D., New Harbinger Publications, Inc., Oakland, CA, 2002

Allegations of Abuse in Family Foster Care, Jacob R. Sprouse, American Foster Care Resources, Inc., King George, VA, 1989

Web Sites

About.com
<http://www.about.com>
(Type “false abuse allegations” in the search window and find related articles.)

Casey Family Programs’ *Allegations of Maltreatment in Out-of-Home Care*
http://www.casey.org/cnc/policy_issues/allegations_of_maltreatment.htm

National Foster Parent Association’s *Position Statement on False Allegations of Abuse in Foster Care*
<http://www.nfpainc.org/BoardBook/BB2.html#2-4o>

National Foster Parent Coalition for Allegation Reform
<http://members.aol.com/nfpcar>