Inside People: Steps to take when you see a child at risk

by Jane Clifford

I remember, years ago, when my husband and I were walking to our car in the parking lot after an outing to the swap meet when a man in front of us jerked a little girl off the ground by her arm and yelled at her. When the girl started crying, the guy whacked her on the backside and snarled, "Shut up!"

At that point, my husband grabbed me by the arm. He knew I wanted to go tell the guy off, but we both knew the man would either turn on me or turn again on the little girl for "causing" the scene.

We let it go, but the troubling memory has stayed with me ever since. I'm sure I am not alone in seeing such a scene and feeling confused and guilty, not knowing for sure what to do.

"You were absolutely right not to confront the guy," says Teresa Stivers, executive director of the Child Abuse Prevention Foundation in San Diego, for those very reasons.

But we can do something when we witness a child at risk of abuse, says Stivers:

- Divert the adult's attention; start a conversation; offer sympathy. "Say, 'It sure is hard to raise kids, isn't it?' When you do that, the person has a couple of minutes to calm down, and they can't help but think that what they did was seen by other people, and it wasn't right, without you actually pointing that out."

- Talk to the child. If the child is acting out or misbehaving, start a friendly conversation to distract him or her.

- Praise the parent or child. Find something positive to say, such as "Your daughter has the most beautiful eyes."

- Offer to help. Ask if you can get the groceries or other purchases to the car, while mom or dad tends to the child.

- Avoid negative looks or comments. This may only increase the adult's anger, making things worse for the child. "He could have just lost his job or he's raising this child by himself," Stivers said of the fellow at the swap meet.

"We really don't know what's going on in their lives. I try to keep that in mind before I judge someone. What you want to do is lighten the tension, maybe get the person to smile or the child to laugh, just for a moment."

Stivers adds that if you suspect a child is being abused or neglected or if you are a child who is being maltreated, contact your local child protective services office or law enforcement agency, so professionals can assess the situation.

Child abuse and neglect is not only a problem where I live.

In 2005, child welfare agencies nationwide investigated 1,346,762 cases of abuse and neglect, according to the National Data Analysis System of the Child Welfare League of America. That's the latest year complete numbers are available, and 13 states do not report their statistics to the league.

By all accounts, the numbers are troubling. Yet, anyone can report suspected child abuse or neglect. Reporting abuse or neglect can protect a child and get help for a family - it may even save a child's life.

Many states and municipalities have a toll-free number to call to report suspected child abuse or neglect. If you are unsure of who to call to report suspected abuse, the Child Welfare League has a hot line with counselors with information about the right agency to contact in your area at 800-422-4453.

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