



Ontario Association of
Children's Aid Societies

The voice of child welfare in Ontario

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**SPEAK UP
FOR KIDS**

Children's Aid Can Help

Neglect is one of the most common child protection concerns in Ontario.

Mary Ballantyne, CEO of the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, discusses how Children's Aid Societies help families dealing with this issue.



"Many people don't realize that most of the work that we do to protect children is done with children in their own homes," says Mary Ballantyne.

How is neglect a form of child abuse?

A child who is neglected is consistently not having their vital needs met. That could mean poor nutrition, lack of attention to hygiene, and so on. From a child welfare perspective, neglect is a concern because it ultimately affects a child's ability to thrive. With very young children, neglect is obviously a real, immediate risk. Inadequate feeding can be life threatening, and lack of attention to hygiene can lead to serious illness. As children mature, neglect might not be a matter of life and death, but it does affect how a child manages day-to-day. A hungry child will struggle in school and can be bullied and ridiculed by peers because of poor hygiene. As children enter adolescence, we start seeing the impacts of neglect on their behaviour, including lower self-esteem and an inability to engage in school because they lack the confidence and skills.

How does child welfare help children who have been neglected?

One of the biggest challenges for a child welfare worker is determining what is at the root of the neglect. Is it that the parent lacks the skills to take care of their child? Is it an addiction or a mental health issue? Poverty can also mean that a parent can't adequately

provide for their child, because there are too many competing needs for the limited resources they do have.

So how will child welfare responses differ according to these different situations?

If it's a parenting skills issue, a child welfare worker will work with the parent or connect the parent with the resources they need to learn those skills. With an addiction or a mental health issue, the parent can enter a treatment program. If it's poverty that's contributing to neglect, the worker can advocate on the family's behalf to get them the resources they need. In some cases it's a combination of all those approaches.

Concrete interventions can often really help some families. It can be extremely hard for a family living in close quarters where the building is falling apart and unsafe. If a child welfare worker can find them a reasonable place to live, where they feel pride, neglect can be reduced. Similarly, alleviating daily stresses by providing transportation or daycare allows a parent to focus more on child rearing. When parents feel good about themselves, it makes them better parents.

Is this a role that child welfare should be taking on?

This is a role that child welfare has played for decades, but it's probably not well understood as an important form of intervention. In-home, hands-on support is crucial: people learn how to be good parents while receiving support for themselves and their child along the way.

Child welfare staff work more and more closely with members of the community where children and their families live. Child welfare plays an important role in linking struggling families to the many vital programs available in their community.

What role can the community play in helping children who are neglected?

One of the benefits of Ontario's model of delivering child welfare services, where the services are governed and delivered primarily in local communities, is that children are as seen as the community's children and not the government's problem. They are *our* kids. The government alone is not going to be able to fix it.

That means a community has a huge role to play. Knowing that someone in your community is struggling, you can ask yourself how you can help them. Offering to take care of your neighbour's kids after school, sharing a meal, or simply listening are important ways that community members can be part of the solution.

Another important thing for people in the community to do if they believe that a child is being abused or neglected is to call Children's Aid. We need people to call even if they're feeling guilty about it. Your call can lead to an offer of support to someone who can't help themselves.

A lot of people feel guilty about calling Children's Aid because they worry the kids will be taken away from their families. What is the reality?

Many people don't realize that most of the work that we do to protect children is done with children in their own homes. That is the starting place. Even if the child needs to leave home for a short period, the goal is nearly always to find a way for them to return home in the safest way possible. It's not always possible, because we are looking at the longer term best interests of the child. But it is very rare for children to be taken away from their families in child welfare work.