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# CAREGIVER

HANDBOOK



*Healing Hearts*

CHILD ADVOCACY CENTER

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# HEALING HEARTS

## CHILD ADVOCACY CENTER

Your child is at Healing Hearts CAC because of concerns about possible abuse.

### **Our goals are to:**

- **Do the best job possible in finding out if something happened**
- **Work with our multidisciplinary team of professionals to ensure your child is receiving all services needed**
- **Help make the process as comfortable as possible for you and your child(ren)**
- **Help your child(ren) and family begin to heal**

We hope this handbook will help you understand more about child abuse and learn about the system we use to respond to a report of abuse.

**Healing Hearts CAC phone number: 662-349-1555**

**Family Advocate:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Child Protection Services:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Law Enforcement:** \_\_\_\_\_

# WHAT IS A CHILD ADVOCACY CENTER (CAC)?

A CAC is a child-focused and child-friendly setting in which a child can feel safe telling what has happened to him or her and can relate his or her experience one time, in one place. Rather than being shuffled between doctors, police, counselors, and child advocates, the CAC model strives to bring these professionals together utilizing a multidisciplinary team - whose primary goal is to reduce the burden on children, minimize trauma, and help facilitate their recovery.

## WHAT WE DO

Healing Hearts Child Advocacy Center opened in 2013 to fill the gap in services for children in DeSoto and Tate counties who are victims of abuse and have an open case with Child Protection Services and/or Law Enforcement. We are 1 of 11 Child Advocacy Centers in the state of Mississippi, a member of the state chapter of Child Advocacy Centers of Mississippi, and have been accredited by the National Children's Alliance since 2015. We provide:

- Court Preparation
- Multidisciplinary Team Coordination
- Crime Victim Compensation Assistance
- Crisis Intervention
- Forensic Interviews
- Family Advocacy Services
- Medical Exam Referrals
- Mental Health Referrals

## BENEFITS OF A CAC

- More immediate follow-ups to reports of child abuse and neglect.
- More efficient medical and mental health services made available to child abuse victims.
- Stronger cases built against perpetrators resulting in more children being protected.
- Increase in arrests and prosecution

# LIFE OF A CASE

## HOW DOES THE CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTER MODEL WORK?



Core Function of CAC



Function Provided by a Team Member

### LAW ENFORCEMENT



The role of local law enforcement is grounded in public safety

If not criminal in nature, law enforcement may not take action

Immediate Response

### CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES

The role of CPS is to ensure that a child's home is safe

If the family/caretaker is not the alleged abuser, CPS may not take action

Priority Assigned  
(24-72 hours)

Child is brought to children's advocacy center

Joint Investigation Begins  
Forensic Interview  
Evidence Collected  
Photos Taken  
Witness Interview  
Medical Treatment and Exam

CAC coordinates Case Review with all team members, including law enforcement, prosecution, Child Protective Services, the forensic interviewer, a mental health provider, a medical professional, and a family advocate

Case presented to District Attorney

Suspect Charged or Case Refused

Child & family receive mental health services—Family advocate works with family to assess critical resources and provide support as the case moves through the justice system

Child Removed from Home, or Case Opened for Services, or Case Closed

# YOUR TEAM OF PROFESSIONALS

We are fortunate to have a highly trained multidisciplinary team of professionals that meet every month. Who discuss each open case to ensure services are being provided. Multidisciplinary team members include:

**Forensic Interviewer:** The Forensic Interviewer is a trained professional who is responsible for providing legally defensible forensic interviews of children and adolescents when there are suspicions of abuse or when the child has been a witness to violence against another person.

**Therapist:** Mental Health Therapists offer trauma-focused treatment to children and their families who become involved with the child advocacy center. The family advocate provides referrals to therapist who use evidence based practices for trauma.

**Family Advocate:** Family Advocates provide information regarding the interview and medical evaluation process and answer questions you may have about the process or child abuse in general. They also work to connect non-offending caregivers and family members with additional services in the community. The Family Advocate provides on going support and up-to-date information. You may be asked to sign a "Release of Information" form so that we can offer pertinent resources regarding your child's case as needed.

**Law Enforcement Officer:** (LE) Police Departments from Hernando, Southaven, Walls, Olive Branch, Horn Lake, Senatobia, and the Sheriff Department from DeSoto and Tate County have investigators on the team. They investigate child abuse cases by speaking to children, non-offending caregivers, suspects, and other witnesses about the incident reported and gather evidence from the scene of the alleged event.

**The Social Worker:** Child Protection Services is responsible for the protection of children. The role of the CPS caseworker is to help protect children by providing services and support to resist conditions that are harmful to children. Caseworkers also work with the child's caregiver to develop a safety plan to help protect the child.

**Medical Team :** The CARES Clinic at LeBonheur Children's Hospital provides medical exams for children that have an open case with Law Enforcement or Child Protection services from DeSoto or Tate County. Your Family Advocate can provide you with further information to access their services.

**District Attorney/Prosecutor:** The prosecutor decides whether charges will be filed. Consideration is given to many factors which will affect the likelihood of success in court. Some of the factors considered are age and maturity of the child, the child's ability to testify, whether or not the suspect has admitted to the allegations, presence of medical evidence, and whether or not there are other witnesses. The District Attorney's Victim Assistance Coordinator is responsible for advocating for the rights of the victims throughout the criminal justice process. They assist victims with case status, courtroom proceedings, crime victims compensation and victim impact statements.

# THE FORENSIC INTERVIEW

## **The Purpose of a Forensic Interview**

When child abuse is suspected, it is critical to talk to the child about their experience and gather information in an age- and developmentally-appropriate manner. The CAC's goal is to help every child feel as comfortable as possible as the multidisciplinary team determines what may have happened. To ensure this goal a Forensic Interviewer will speak with the child to gather information in a compassionate and non-leading fashion.

## **The Forensic Interview:**

- Minimizes the number of times a child is interviewed and limits the number of people who must directly interview a child;
- Is conducted in the child's primary language, whenever possible. (When unable to conduct a forensic interview in a child's primary language, an interpreter will assist.);
- Helps coordinate services for a child and family, and;
- Allows the parent/caregiver to meet all of the professionals involved with their child and provides an opportunity to ask questions.

## **What is a Forensic Interview?**

A forensic interview is a fact-finding conversation conducted by a specially-trained Forensic Interviewer. The interview is designed to provide the child an opportunity to talk about the reason for their visit to the CAC. The Forensic Interviewer strives to make the child feel as comfortable as possible while gathering information to determine what may have occurred. Questions are asked in a non-leading manner at pace that is comfortable for the child.

**Child abuse can be traumatizing for children and it is important that they are not pressured to repeatedly talk about their experience.**

# THE MEDICAL EXAM

## **During the Exam**

The CARES Clinic doctor at LeBonheur Children's Hospital performs a full medical check-up which may include an external genital exam if sexual abuse is suspected. During the exam, the doctor will explain everything they are doing to the patient and will allow the patient as much time as they need to feel comfortable and confident about the physical exam. None of these exam techniques are expected to be painful. If the doctor finds an injury or lesion during the exam, they may take a picture of the finding with a special camera. A nurse or a parent will be present during the entire exam. If at any time the patient becomes uncomfortable and wants to stop, the exam will be stopped.

## **After the Exam**

The patient and caregiver may wish to discuss any exam findings noted by the doctor, and the doctors will be more than willing to discuss any questions or concerns at that time. A key principle to keep in mind is that most exams for sexual abuse find no "evidence" of sexual contact, but this does not mean that nothing happened to your child. The doctor will discuss this in detail after the visit. If the patient was noted to have concern for infection or injury, the doctor will give clear directions as to next steps.

# COURT PREPARATION

If there is to be a trial, your Healing Hearts CAC Family Advocate or a Victim Assistance Coordinator from the District Attorney's Office can give your child an orientation of the court room. You will also be involved in this process.

**Giving the child an early look at the courtroom and preparing him/her on what to expect can ease some of the child's fears, which may include the following:**

- **Seeing the abuser again**
- **Not wanting to go**
- **Wanting it to be over**
- **Wondering where you will be**

Your child should never be in the courtroom without a trusting, friendly face, so make sure your Healing Hearts CAC Family Advocate, a best friend, or a relative stays with your child at all times.

*COURT SCHOOL IS AVAILABLE: Contact Healing Hearts CAC Family Advocate when you secure your court date to arrange a time for your child to receive a brief court orientation to help prepare them for their court experience.*

# VICTIM'S COMPENSATION

If you or your family have been a victim of a violent crime and have financial losses resulting from the injuries that are not covered in full by insurance or any other source, the Crime Victim Compensation Program may be of some assistance to you. A single violent crime can have a profound impact on a person's life, resulting in serious physical injury, psychological trauma, absence from work and other financial strains. While no amount of financial aid can erase the trauma of crime, it is the goal of this program to ease the aftermath of crime for the victim whenever possible. The application to apply for assistance from Crime Victim's Compensation is included in your Caregiver Resource Packet.

As a victim of crime in Mississippi you have the following rights:

## **You have the right to be told...**

- about services available to you in your county
- about certain court events, including information on bail, escape of offender, release of an offender
- about the details of the final disposition of a case

## **You have the right to receive...**

- notice of the arrest of the offender
- information about restitution and assistance with compensation
- accompaniment to all criminal proceedings by a family member, a victim advocate or a support person

## **You have the right to provide input...**

- into the sentencing
- decision and to receive help in preparing an oral and/or written victim impact statement
- into post sentencing decisions

For additional information visit [www.ago.state.ms.us](http://www.ago.state.ms.us). Or call 1-800-829-6766.

# THErapy OVERVIEW

## **What is Therapy?**

Therapy provides a safe and confidential place for a person to talk to a professional about personal experiences, thoughts, feelings, or problems. People who go to therapy may have experienced a situation that disrupts and/or impacts his or her thinking, mood, feelings, or ability to relate to others. A person may also seek out therapy because they want a neutral and safe place to talk about general life experiences. Everyone needs somewhere they feel safe and supported. The role of the therapist is to help the person understand his/her situation, teach strategies to express him/herself, and cope with potentially stressful situations. The therapist can also offer the individual or family tools to help them manage difficult feelings, and/or negative thoughts and behaviors.

## **What is Trauma-Focused Therapy?**

Trauma-Focused Therapy is a specific approach to therapy that recognizes and emphasizes understanding of how a traumatic experience impacts a child's mental, behavioral, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. This type of therapy is rooted in understanding the connection between the trauma experience and the child's emotional and behavioral responses. The purpose of trauma-focused therapy is to offer skills and strategies to assist your child in better understanding, coping with, processing emotions and memories tied to traumatic experiences, with the end goal of enabling your child to create a healthier and more adaptive meaning of the experience that took place in his/her life.

source: Center for Child Assessment Services and Interventions Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine

## **How do I request counseling for my child?**

You can request for a referral to be made for your child by contacting your Family Advocate at Healing Hearts CAC.

# WHAT IS CHILD ABUSE?

## **Child abuse or child maltreatment**

Child abuse is when a parent or caregiver, whether through action or failing to act, causes injury, death, emotional harm or risk of serious harm to a child. There are many forms of child maltreatment, including neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, exploitation and emotional abuse.

## **Physical Abuse**

Physical abuse of a child is when any non-accidental physical injury to a child occurs. Physical abuse includes striking, kicking, burning, biting, hair pulling, choking, throwing, shoving, whipping or any other action that injures or leaves a mark on a child. Even if the alleged offender did not mean to cause injury, when the child exhibits signs of injury, such as: bruising, burn marks, cuts, etc., it is abuse. Physical discipline from a caregiver that does not injure or impair a child is not considered abuse; however non-violent alternatives are available.

## **Sexual Abuse**

Sexual abuse occurs when an adult uses a child for sexual purposes or involves a child in sexual acts, pictures, videos or any pornographic material. This type of abuse also occurs when a child uses power and control over another child for sexual gratification or excitement.

## **Emotional Abuse**

Emotional abuse is when a parent or caregiver harms a child's mental and social development, or causes severe emotional harm. While a single incident may be abuse, most often emotional abuse is a pattern of behavior that causes damage over time.

## **Neglect**

Child neglect is when a parent or caregiver does not give the care, supervision, affection and support needed for a child's health, safety and well-being. Child neglect includes:

- Physical neglect and inadequate supervision
- Emotional neglect
- Medical Neglect

# POSSIBLE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA ON CHILDREN

## Trauma May Affect Children In the Following Ways

### Body

- Inability to control physical responses to stress
- Chronic illness

### Brain (thinking)

- Difficulty thinking, learning, and concentrating
- Impaired memory
- Difficulty switching from one thought or activity to another

### Emotions (feeling)

- Low self-esteem
- Feeling unsafe
- Inability to regulate emotions
- Trouble with friendships
- Trust issues
- Depression or anxiety

### Behavior

- Lack of impulse control
- Fighting or aggression
- Running away
- Substance abuse

“Trauma Triggers: When your child is behaving in a way that is unexpected and seems irrational or extreme, he or she may be experiencing a trauma trigger. trigger is some aspect of a traumatic event that occurs in a completely different situation but reminds the child of the original event. Examples may be sounds, smells, feelings, places, postures, tones of voice, or even emotions.”

source: [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)

# WHAT CAN YOU DO?

**Return to a normal routine as soon as possible.**

**See that your child receives therapy as soon as possible.** Trying to sweep the problem under the rug usually causes more problems because it will not go away.

**Find help for yourself.**

You don't have to do it all on your own. Contact Healing Hearts CAC Family Advocates for assistance.

**Teach your child the rules of personal safety.** Tell them what to do if someone tries to touch them in an uncomfortable way.

**Be careful not to question your child about the abuse.** If you question your child, you can jeopardize the case in court against your child's abuser. Specially trained Forensic Interviewers at Healing Hearts CAC will interview your child to obtain the necessary information without harming the case or causing further trauma. If your child wants to talk about it, listen supportively, but do not probe.

**Keep your child away from the person suspected of the abuse.**

This is to protect you, that person, and the child. Avoid discussing the case with other victims or their families.

**Never advise your child on how to act or what to say to professionals or investigators.** This could seriously damage the case. It is important that your child shares their story in their own words.

**Your child may need an extra sense of physical security.** Assure your child that you will try your best to keep him/her safe.

# WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILD

- Provide safety, love, and support.
- Let them know it is okay to cry or to be mad.
- Make sure your child understands it is not his or her fault.
- Do not pressure your child to talk about things.

## EMPOWERING THINGS YOU CAN SAY TO YOUR CHILD

- **I believe you.**
- **It's not your fault.**
- I'm glad I know about it.
- I'm sorry this happened to you.
- I will take care of you.
- I'm not sure what will happen next.
- Nothing about YOU made this happen.
- Other children have had similar experiences.
- You don't need to take care of me.
- I am upset, but not with you.
- I'm angry at the person who did this.
- I'm sad. You may see me cry. That's all right. I will be able to take care of you. I'm not mad at you.
- I don't know why the person did it.
- You can still love someone but hate what they did to you.

**It is important NOT to question your child  
about what they said in the forensic interview.**

# COMMENTS YOU CAN EXPECT TO HEAR FROM OTHERS

- "What exactly happened to your child?"
- "Are you sure your child didn't make it up?"
- "Why didn't you know it was happening?"
- "Your poor child must be feeling really guilty."

## HOW TO RESPOND

Remember, you do not owe anyone an explanation. Some example responses include: "I'd rather not talk about it." "It's been a very difficult time for all of us." "I appreciate your concern." "I would prefer to respect my child's privacy."

Your child may feel some unnecessary guilt but assure them that they are not responsible in any way for what happened. As a caregiver, you might also be experiencing some guilt. Remember caregivers do their best, but we're only human.

Let your child know that she/he does not always have to respond to comments or questions. Your child could say, "I'd rather not talk about it." Your family can decide whom you will tell. Others may be the first to learn about the abuse. You may feel hurt that someone knew before you. However, understand that your child may have been trying to protect your feelings by telling someone else. It is important to maintain your child's sense of privacy, self-control, and dignity.

# HOW CAREGIVERS SOMETIMES FEEL

When abuse is reported, parents or caregivers sometimes feel as if they are on a roller coaster of emotions. This is normal. The report can affect your life in many ways, and it takes time to adjust. The following are some of the common thoughts and feelings of caregivers. You may feel one or more of these, or you may move from one to another.

**1. Denial.** Your first reaction may be not to believe or accept the possibility that abuse really happened. You may believe it happened but that no real harm was done. Caregivers often experience denial because it is too overwhelming to accept that the abuse occurred and that there will be after-effects. For some people, it takes time to overcome denial and face the realities of abuse.

**2. Anger.** At times, you may feel angry at yourself for not protecting the child. You may feel angry at the perpetrator for what s/he did. You may even feel angry at the child. Be honest about your feelings and share them with a trusted person or group.

**3. Helplessness.** You probably do not know what to expect and feel that things are out of your control. Some parents may fear that their children will be taken away. Your Family Advocate can help you to stay informed of how your child's case proceeds through the system.

**4. Lack of assertiveness.** You may feel invisible and think there is nothing you can do to help the situation get better. We will help you learn what you can do to be an advocate for your child and yourself

# HOW CAREGIVERS SOMETIMES FEEL

**5. Shock, numbness, repulsion.** You may have memories of being abused as a child, which may lead to shock, numbness, and repulsion for the new situation you find yourself in. If so, you may need to seek therapy for yourself to recover from the abuse.

**6. Guilt, self-blame.** You may feel it is all your fault. The offender is responsible for the abuse, not you. The best thing you can do now is support your child and learn all you can about how to make things better. Reading this handbook is a good first step.

**7. Hurt and betrayal.** It is normal to feel hurt from the loss of your child's innocence. You also may have lost a spouse or partner if that person was the offender. You may even have lost friends. It is very important to take time to grieve for these losses.

**8. Concern about money.** You may be worried about finances because of lost income. A Family Advocate or CPS Social Worker will work with you to help you get on your feet.

**9. Fear of violence.** Where violence is present, you may fear the offender will try to harm you or your children. If so, call House of Grace, the domestic violence shelter, at 662-342-1432 or Bikers Against Child Abuse at 901-654-8615.

**10. Fear of drug or alcohol abuse.** You may be afraid that you or the offender will abuse drugs or alcohol because of the stress or that one of you may relapse to an old addiction. If you need help, call Region 4 Mental Health Services at 662-449-1971 or Beth Storey at New Directions Counseling Center (662)253-8324

# TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

You are going through a very difficult time, and you probably feel pressured from many directions. Although you are trying to take care of a lot of other people, you also need to take care of yourself. Your well-being is very important and so is finding time to do something just for you and plan to do it regularly.

**Research studies have indicated that it is just as important that the parents or caregivers receive counseling about the abuse as it is for the child victim. Tools for Self Care include:**

**Focusing on self-care**- making a healthy diet, exercise, and regular sleep priorities reduces adverse stress effects.

**Journaling**- writing about feelings related to care giving and anything that has been comforting can help make meaning out of negative experiences.

**Seeking professional support**- working with a counselor who specializes in trauma to process distressing symptoms and experiences provides additional perspectives and ideas.

**Learning new self-care strategies**- adopting a new stress management technique such as yoga or progressive muscle relaxation can reduce adverse physical stress symptoms.

**Asking for help**- asking your community support system to assist with tasks or responsibilities can help with healing.

**Joining a support group**- talking through experiences and coping strategies with others who have similar circumstances can enhance optimism and hope.

source: Secondary Traumatic Stress, Administration for Children and Families, [www.acf.hhs.gov](http://www.acf.hhs.gov)

**Healing Hearts CAC has a Caregiver Support Group, if you would like to join this group, contact your Family Advocate for information.**

# COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- Bikers Against Child Abuse.....(662) 901-654-8615
- Child Protection Services (CPS) (DeSoto).....(662) 469-8012
- Child Protection Services (CPS) (Tate).....(662) 562-4478
- Communicare (Tate).....(662) 562-5216
- Domestic Violence Shelter - House of Grace.....(662) 342-1432
- MS Child Abuse Hotline.....(800) 222-8000  
[www.mdcpms.gov/report-child-abuse-neglect](http://www.mdcpms.gov/report-child-abuse-neglect)
- MS Dept. of Health.....(877) 210-8513
- National Runaway Hotline.....(800) 621-4000
- National Suicide Lifeline.....(800) 273-8255
- New Directions Counseling Center.....(662) 253-8324
- Region IV Mental Health Services .....662) 449-1808
- Crime Victim's Compensation.....(800)829-6766

## COUNSELING REFERRAL:



*Healing Hearts*

CHILD ADVOCACY CENTER

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Southaven, MS 38672

662-349-1555

[www.healingheartscac.org](http://www.healingheartscac.org)

**Healing Hearts Child Advocacy Center's mission  
is to respond to child abuse with a supportive  
team approach that reduces trauma through advocacy,  
treatment, education, and prevention.**