

# Media Guide for Reporting on Child Abuse

Reporting on child abuse is a difficult, but important duty for journalists. The sensitivity of the topic, the graphic nature of the allegations, and the public outrage that accompanies the cases can become overwhelming for the journalist and the audience.

Stories focusing on the abuse, with no information about prevention or solutions, can lead the audience to feel powerless to reduce or prevent the problem. However, media professionals have a unique opportunity to impact public awareness on the issue of child abuse. Journalists can broaden the focus of child maltreatment stories by documenting or reporting on how the local community is working to prevent future cases of abuse. By implementing this change in scope, the media can provide the audience with information on how to prevent child abuse and ensure the healthy development of all our children. (1, 2, 3, 4)

This guide was created to help reporters, producers, and editors make informed decisions concerning coverage of crimes involving children. Each story is your chance to help your audience understand that fewer children will experience abuse or neglect when communities work together to prevent child abuse.

It is our hope that this guide and the resources provided by the National Children's Advocacy Center will be of benefit to every journalist who covers child maltreatment. Together, we can impact global advances in preventing child abuse by stimulating positive social change in our own local communities.

## The Facts

When reporting the facts of crimes against children, it is important to discuss the impact of public disclosure of the details. Below are some issues to consider.



Will details of the report inadvertently disclose the identity of the victim? (Ex. John Doe is charged with sexual abuse. Investigators say the victim is his step-daughter/niece/girlfriend's son) <sup>(5, 6, 7, 8)</sup>



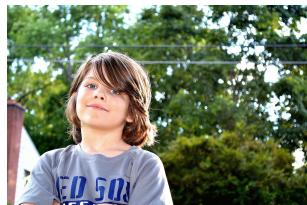
Will revealing a child's identity, even with the permission of the parent or guardian, adversely impact the child in the future? <sup>(5, 6, 7, 8, 10)</sup>



What is the viewer benefit of knowing all the facts of the case? Are some details too heinous? <sup>(9)</sup>



Are you using the correct, legal terminology for the crime? <sup>(12)</sup>



## Story Angles

Nobody is talking. It's the phrase every reporter dreads saying and every producer/editor detests hearing. It is rare for someone directly involved with the case to agree to an interview.

It is even more rare for anyone directly involved with the case to say anything meaningful even if someone does agree to an interview. In order to keep the story in the news cycle without compromising the case, consider expanding the story to include the impact of abuse and possible solutions. For example, consider:

- How is the community working to prevent child abuse? Talk to your local Children's Advocacy Center or to Child Protective Services and/or law enforcement.
- How could this type of abuse impact a child later in life? How does therapy help children heal from abuse? Talk to a mental health professional who specializes in childhood trauma and evidence-based treatment.
- Who is covered under mandatory report laws in your state? Talk to a local legal expert, have them explain who is covered, why, and what can happen to those who violate this law.
- Does the area have a survivors' network? Talk to a spokesperson about the resources available for the victim and the victim's family.

- What is the prevalence of this type of crime in your community? Talk to the local police department/sheriff's office or prosecutor about the number of cases they see in a year or a month.
- What can the average person do to prevent child abuse? Another good question for the local Children's Advocacy Center.
- How are reports of child maltreatment investigated? Have the area Children's Advocacy Center walk you through what happens from the moment a there is an allegation of child abuse.

## Self-Care

Every experienced journalist will, at some point, be personally impacted by a story. The details that are revealed in testimony or court documents show the ugliest side of humanity.

Vicarious trauma is real and can lead to long-term issues including PTSD, depression, and substance abuse. The Dart Center provided these tips for dealing with trauma on the job. <sup>(11)</sup>

- Defuse with someone you trust.
- Monitor for delayed reactions.
- Maintain normal activities and routines, but slow down.
- Seek professional help if distress continues 3 to 4 weeks after assignment . If an assignment leaves a journalist feeling too vulnerable, management should support the journalist's decision to request an unrelated assignment.



### Other Resources

CDC Suggested Practices for Journalists Reporting on Child Abuse and Neglect  
<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/childmaltreatment/journalists-guide.pdf>

Frameworks Institute Report on Unintended Consequences  
<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/canp/resources/pdf/HowTheNewsFramesChildAbuse.pdf>

Dart Center Guide for Covering Children & Trauma  
[https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/covering\\_children\\_and\\_trauma\\_0.pdf](https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/covering_children_and_trauma_0.pdf)

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