

241-KIDS: Questions & Answers

Parents who love, nurture and protect their children create the best environment for growing up. Sometimes, though, situations occur that can put a child at risk for serious harm. When you suspect or know of child abuse or neglect, there is a way to report it – call 241-KIDS (241-5437).

This fact sheet should answer many of your questions about 241-KIDS. It will help you understand when to call, what to expect when you call, and steps we take to respond.

What is 241-KIDS?

241-KIDS, or 241-5437, is Hamilton County's hotline to report known or suspected cases of child abuse and neglect. It is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Just like other hotlines across Ohio and the United States, 241-KIDS provides social services intervention on behalf of children who are victims of or at risk for abuse and neglect. It functions under mandates from Congress, the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, the Ohio General Assembly, and the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

Who operates 241-KIDS?

Children's Services, a unit of Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services (HCJFS), operates 241-KIDS. Children's Services is the public agency required by law to receive and respond to reports of child abuse and neglect in Hamilton County.

What is *child abuse*?

Child abuse is intentional injury by a parent or caretaker. While Ohio law permits corporal punishment in the home, physical discipline that leaves an injury can be abuse. Other examples of abuse include sexual contact between an adult and child, some cases of sexual contact between children, injury due to parental negligence, and mental/ emotional trauma caused by parental behavior.

What is *child neglect*?

Child neglect refers to not receiving adequate food, shelter, supervision, education or medical care due to parental faults or habits.

Who answers when I call 241-KIDS?

Specially trained caseworkers staff the hotline 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They will ask questions to determine whether your information is an allegation of abuse or neglect.

What kind of questions will they ask?

Calling 241-KIDS is not like calling 911, where information must be gathered quickly in order to handle an emergency situation. **If you believe a situation is an emergency, call 911 first.** Law enforcement will then involve 241-KIDS and/or Children's Services.

If you suspect child abuse, call 241-KIDS. Caseworkers will ask a variety of questions that help them make good decisions, such as:

- What is your name, telephone number and relationship to the child?
- How old is the child?
- Where and when did the abuse or neglect take place?
- What exactly happened?
- What is the child's current condition?
- How does the child behave? Has the child been abused or neglected before?
- What led to the incident?
- Has the child received medical care?

- Who is responsible for the abuse or neglect? Is that person related to the child? Does that person have access to the child? How does that person behave?
- Who is the child's caretaker? How does the caretaker behave?
- What other children live in the home? What are their names, ages and relationships?
- Who else has witnessed the abuse or neglect?
- Who else knows about it?

We aren't being nosy when we ask if drugs, alcohol or domestic violence were involved. It's our job to sift through details and get basic information. We are here to work *with* you.

Do I have to give my name?

No, but giving your name will allow Children's Services to contact you for more information, if necessary. Confidentiality laws strictly protect the identity of anyone who reports child abuse or neglect.

Will the people I called about be able to find out my name?

While there is a risk that people you report could guess who called, state law requires that your report remain confidential to protect both you and the victim. HCJFS Children's Services will not reveal your identity to anyone except under court order.

How will Children's Services decide what to do about my call?

Like a hospital emergency room, priorities have to be set. Many factors determine priority such as the child's age and the severity of the alleged injury or neglect. Emergencies, such as children who may be at highest risk of abuse or neglect, are served first.

Caseworkers assess safety and risk using agency policies and procedures, state JFS guidelines and state law as a framework for consistent decision-making. Schools or doctors may also be contacted for more information.

When will an investigation start?

All investigations begin within 24 hours after calls are received, but how it begins – a face-to-face contact, a phone conversation, or some other way – depends on the priority assigned to the call (see last question). This ensures the best use of limited staff and fastest attention to the most at-risk children.

When information suggests that the child is at immediate, serious risk, we attempt face-to-face contact with the alleged victim within one hour. When the risk is high but not immediate, we attempt face-to-face contact with the victim within 24 hours of receiving the report. When information suggests that the child is not currently at serious risk, we try to make contact with a principal of the case within 24 hours of receiving the report and attempt face-to-face contact with the child within 72 hours.

Who assesses abuse and neglect allegations?

Caseworkers in the Children's Services Investigations Section have that responsibility. Reports involving an out-of-home setting, such as a day care center or summer camp, are assigned to the Hamilton County JFS Out-of-Home Care Unit, which is part of Children's Services.

What happens during an investigation?

Don't expect flashing lights and sirens. Children's Services caseworkers act quietly. They are thorough, discreet and sensitive. They show extraordinary care for children while going about their work. Their main goal is to help the family and community reduce the risk of harm to the child.

They gather facts through interviews, observations, home visits and reports from professionals such as school teachers and psychologists. They weigh findings against state definitions to determine whether a child was abused or neglected. They also assess the likelihood that a child will be harmed in the near future. However, they don't have crystal balls. Caseworkers use their professional judgment.

What happens if Children's Services finds abuse or neglect?

Children's Services' role is one of helper. After identifying problems, we work with the family to solve them. The main goal, however, is to protect the children.

Working to solve family problems may involve providing them with contacts for a variety of services such as counseling, day care, home management training, parenting classes or substance abuse treatment. If an investigation reveals a child is unsafe in living conditions, and no services or voluntary plan of care can immediately reduce the risk, Children's Services can petition Juvenile Court to remove the youngster from the home for substitute care with a relative or foster family. If the child is judged at moderate or high risk of future mistreatment, Children's Services will make regular home visits and provide services to help the family and reduce risk to the child. Federal and state laws require that Children's Services make "reasonable efforts" to ensure that the child remain in the "least restrictive" setting possible.

When should I call 241-KIDS?

Whenever you suspect that a child under the age of 18 (or 21 if physically or mentally disabled) has been abused or neglected. Call as soon as you become aware of a problem. Don't wait a day or two because that can make it difficult – if not impossible – to get good evidence.

What time should I call?

You can call any time of day. 241-KIDS takes calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week. More staff members are on hand to take calls during regular business hours (7 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekdays).

Reports can also be made in writing or in person. Send a letter to or visit the Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services, 222 East Central Parkway, Cincinnati, OH, 45202.

How will I know if Children's Services is involved?

You probably won't. Allegations of child abuse and neglect are serious, and the privacy of victims is strictly protected. Under state law, only professionals who report abuse, such as doctors and teachers, can find out if the agency will investigate. You may not hear from us again, but please don't jump to the conclusion that we're not taking action.

What if Children's Services decides not to do an assessment?

Sometimes people call 241-KIDS because they may not know who else to contact about a concern. However, not all problems involve abuse or neglect. In these instances, we help a caller get in touch with the right community resource. A 241-KIDS caseworker may refer callers to a community agency or social service provider better-suited to respond to a particular concern.