

## Ensuring Our Children's Safety: How Communities Are Addressing Child Abuse and Neglect

By Ann Mintz with Janet Ojeda and Naja Williamson

### The Issue:

**More than 19 of every 1,000 children in Georgia suffered neglect or some form of abuse in 2003.** <sup>1</sup>

**Child Abuse and Neglect often goes unreported. The actual incidence may be more than 3 times higher than reported rates.**

**Georgia law defines 5 categories of child maltreatment.**

**Georgia's child endangerment legislation was adopted in 2004.**

Georgia ranks among the top 10 worst states in the overall incidence of substantiated cases of child maltreatment for 2003, the latest year for data availability. The tragedy of abuse and neglect affects children in urban, rural, and suburban settings across all socioeconomic classes, races, ethnicities, and religious groups. Often the problem remains hidden since most children are victimized behind closed doors in their own homes.

### What is Child Abuse and Neglect?

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974—reauthorized in 2003 as the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act <sup>2</sup>—established a broad framework for states in tracking and responding to the maltreatment of children. Displayed in Table 1 are five generally recognized categories of abuse and neglect. Relevant Georgia laws can be found at O.C.G.A. § 19-7-5 et seq. and O.C.G.A. § 16-5-70 et seq.

**Table 1** *Categories of Child Maltreatment*

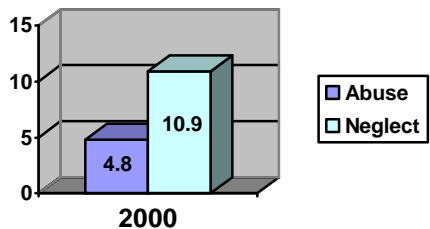
Definitions	Examples
<b>Physical Abuse</b>	
Acts that caused or could have caused physical injury or death	Severe beatings Burns, bites, and bruises Fractures Shaking of infants and young children
<b>Sexual abuse or exploitation</b>	
Involvement of the child in sexual activity to provide sexual gratification or financial benefit to the perpetrator	Contacts for sexual purposes, molestation, statutory rape, prostitution, pornography, exposure, incest
<b>Emotional abuse</b>	
Acts or omissions other than physical abuse or sexual abuse that caused or could have caused behavioral, cognitive, affective or other mental disorders	Verbal abuse or withholding emotional support; Unreasonable demands on child to perform above capabilities; Using shameful or bizarre forms of punishment
<b>Neglect</b>	
Failure to provide a child with age-appropriate care although having the financial means to do so or offered assistance to do so	Failure to provide food, clothing, shelter, education, medical care, or adequate supervision
<b>Child Endangerment (added in 2004)</b>	
Negligence that could reasonably have been anticipated to cause a child cruel or excessive physical or mental pain	Leaving child for extended time in locked car; Letting person who behaves in an irresponsible or violent manner supervise child; Allowing a child to witness family violence, the manufacture of illegal drugs or other felony offenses

## How Serious is the Problem in Georgia?

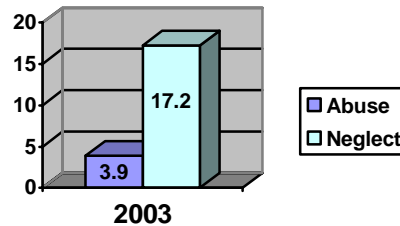
The Georgia Department of Human Resources Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) identified 43,923 children in 2003 that, following investigation, were substantiated as victims of abuse or neglect. Of the 49 children who died as a result of abuse or neglect, nearly half were previously unknown to DFCS.

Listed below are rates of child abuse and neglect cases in Georgia taken from the 2005 Georgia Kids Count report published by Family Connection Partnership. Any comparison of child maltreatment rates must account for variations in state laws and policies and the extent to which such reports are made and investigated. While children are often victimized in multiple ways simultaneously, states categorize each substantiated case by the primary type of maltreatment suffered.

Substantiated Child Abuse Rates per  
1,000 Children



Substantiated Child Neglect Rates  
per 1,000 Children



The percentage of cases attributed to sexual and physical abuse in Georgia is about half that of the United States as a whole.

The percentage of cases attributed to neglect in Georgia is about one-third higher than that of the United States as a whole.

## Which Children are Most at Risk?

Although there is no single cause of maltreatment, research has identified factors that strongly correlate with the probability that a child will become a victim. Children at greater risk of neglect or abuse are:

- **Young children.** Children from birth through age 3 are most likely to be victims. In 2003, almost 25 of every 1,000 Georgia children in this age group were victims. <sup>3</sup>
- **Children with disabilities.** Rates for children with a developmental, physical or behavioral disability are higher than for other children. National data suggest these children are 51 percent more likely to be victims. <sup>4</sup> In Georgia, 3,791 children with disabilities were victims in 2003. <sup>5</sup>

Children from birth to age 3 are most at risk.

Table 2 captures the national data on living situations for children with high probabilities of becoming victims of abuse or neglect. Not all children with these characteristics or living in these situations become victims of child maltreatment.

**Table 2** *Family Factors and Situations Correlated with Child Maltreatment*

<b>Family Factors and Situations</b>	
<b>Young Mothers</b>	<p>Neglect is the most frequent form of maltreatment by young mothers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nearly 60% of perpetrators are a female parent.</li> <li>More than 40% of these female perpetrators are under age 30.</li> </ul>
<b>Single Parent Homes</b>	<p>Children in single parent homes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are 120% more likely to experience some form of maltreatment.</li> <li>Tend to have weak ties to extended family, neighbors, and community.</li> <li>Experience constantly changing family configurations, living on and off with different adults and children.</li> </ul>
<b>Domestic Violence</b>	<p>Domestic violence is a significant marker of child abuse and neglect.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In 30-60% of families with identified child maltreatment or domestic violence, it is likely that both forms of abuse exist.</li> <li>About 50% of men who frequently assault their wives also frequently assault their children.</li> <li>Rates of child abuse and neglect are higher among mothers who were beaten by a spouse or intimate partner.<sup>6</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Mental Health Problems</b>	<p>Parents or caretakers who neglect or abuse children:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Often have underlying emotional or affective disorders that limit their ability to parent.</li> <li>May experience low self-esteem, poor impulse control, depression, anxiety, and anti-social behaviors.<sup>7</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Alcohol/Substance Abuse</b>	<p>Parents or caretakers that abuse alcohol and/or other controlled or illegal substances:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are more likely to neglect or abuse their children.<sup>8</sup></li> <li>About 40% of all families in Georgia with substantiated child abuse or neglect cases had at least one adult alcohol or substance abuser in the home.<sup>9</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Vulnerable Communities</b>	<p>Families in neighborhoods with high unemployment, poverty, frequent crime or violence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are highly stressed.</li> <li>Have an increased likelihood of family dysfunction, including child abuse and neglect.<sup>10</sup></li> </ul>

**Domestic violence is a key indicator of the potential for child abuse and neglect.**

**Children who were abused or neglected are more likely to abuse or neglect their own children when they become parents.**

## What Are the Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect?

Some children recover from maltreatment without serious consequences while other victims, who survive into adulthood, experience effects that last a lifetime. This ability to cope following a negative experience is called "resilience"; researchers are exploring the reasons why some children are more resilient than others. Research findings have documented linkages between child abuse and neglect to a wide range of disorders.

**Table 3** *Physical and Social Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect*

<p><b>Impaired Brain Development</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Important regions of the brain may fail to form properly and may result in impaired physical, mental, and emotional development.</li> <li>• Chronic abuse can cause a "hyper arousal" response by certain areas of the brain. Results: hyperactivity, increased vulnerability to attention deficit disorder, learning disabilities and memory difficulties.</li> <li>• Survivors of "shaken baby syndrome" may experience mental retardation, cerebral palsy, or paralysis.<sup>11</sup></li> </ul>
<p><b>Poor Physical Health</b></p>	<p>Victims:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are more likely to be smaller and lighter weight than non-maltreated children with long-term health problems.</li> <li>• May experience physical or sexual injuries, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS.</li> <li>• Develop stress-related symptoms such as gastrointestinal problems, migraine headaches, difficulty breathing, hypertension, aches, pains, and rashes which defy diagnosis and/or treatment.<sup>12</sup></li> </ul>
<p><b>Social Problems</b></p>	<p>Survivors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often cannot trust or form secure attachments to others.</li> <li>• May develop Reactive Attachment Disorder, a complex psychiatric illness characterized by a lack of empathy for others or remorse for wrongdoings, manipulative or aggressive behaviors, destructiveness, or cruelty to animals.<sup>13</sup></li> </ul>
<p><b>Poor Mental and Emotional Health</b></p>	<p>Of young adults who had been abused:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Up to 80% have at least one psychiatric disorder at age 21.</li> <li>• Many exhibit depression, anxiety, eating disorders, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicide attempts.<sup>14</sup></li> </ul>
<p><b>Risky Behavioral Patterns</b></p>	<p>Adolescent victims:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are at least 25% more likely to experience delinquency, teen pregnancy, be a runaway, or use alcohol or drugs.<sup>15</sup></li> </ul>
<p><b>Adult Criminality</b></p>	<p>Victims of abuse demonstrate a:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 28% increased likelihood of adult criminal behavior.</li> <li>• 30% increased likelihood of violent crime.<sup>16</sup></li> </ul>
<p><b>Abusive Behavior</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abusive parents often have experienced abuse during their own childhoods.</li> <li>• Approximately one-third of abused and neglected children will eventually victimize their own children.<sup>17</sup></li> </ul>
<p><b>Social Costs</b></p>	<p>Child welfare system costs \$24 billion annually to maintain.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expenditures include judicial, law enforcement, health, and mental health systems to respond to abused children and their families.</li> </ul> <p>Indirect costs total another \$69 billion per year; they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflect the long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect.</li> <li>• Include special education services, juvenile and adult criminal activity costs, mental illness, substance abuse, health care, domestic violence, and underemployment.<sup>18</sup></li> </ul>

**The consequences of abuse and neglect can be complex and costly.**

**A response to child abuse and neglect requires a community-wide approach.**

**Build on the existing expertise in your community.**

**Home visitation programs such as Healthy Families Georgia are a best practice in preventing child abuse and neglect.**

## What Can Community Collaboratives Do?

An effective approach to child maltreatment should begin by:

- Gathering information about the nature and scope of the problem at the local level.
- Building collaborative relationships with individuals and groups already working in the field.
- Developing strategies to strengthen protective factors that prevent maltreatment while addressing the risk factors that contribute to it.
- Developing an evaluation strategy to measure results.

Limited grant funding is available to communities wishing to undertake new initiatives to prevent the incidence of child abuse and neglect through the Georgia Children’s Trust Fund Commission.

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### Strategy: Utilize Existing Community Activities Addressing Issues of Child Safety

<p><b>Child Abuse Protocol</b></p> <p>and</p> <p><b>Child Fatality Review Committees</b></p>	<p>Georgia law (O.C.G.A. § 19-15-2 and § 19-15-3) requires every county to establish these two committees: Child Abuse Protocol and Child Fatality Review.</p> <p>Charge: Ensure that child abuse and questionable child deaths are investigated appropriately; make recommendations to improve the safety of children; file a report of its activities and recommendations.</p> <p>Each committee has these representatives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sheriff and police departments</li> <li>• County DFCS office</li> <li>• District attorney’s office; juvenile and magistrate courts</li> <li>• Boards of education</li> <li>• County mental health agency and Board of Health</li> <li>• Coroner or medical examiner</li> </ul>
<p><b>Prevent Child Abuse Georgia</b></p>	<p>The preeminent child abuse prevention agency in Georgia provides:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community-based chartered councils in nearly every county.</li> <li>• Prevention programs and services to include parent support programs, prevention education, and public awareness activities.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Healthy Families Georgia</b></p>	<p>A project of Prevent Child Abuse Georgia and the Children’s Trust Fund available in many counties to provide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A continuum of services consisting of short-term support for all new families through a First Steps program.</li> <li>• Long-term (up to five years) voluntary home visitation for vulnerable families. Visits focus on positive parent-child interaction, healthy child development, stronger family functioning, and appropriate community linkages.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Georgia CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates)</b></p>	<p>Local affiliates work with children in many counties to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and support court-sanctioned, community-based programs.</li> <li>• Provide trained and supervised volunteers who advocate for the best interests of abused and neglected children involved in juvenile court deprivation proceedings.</li> </ul>

**Strategy: Implement Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Campaigns and Initiatives to Support At-Risk Families in the Community**

**Quality early childcare and education is a best practice in preventing child abuse and neglect.**

**Build connections and supports for families and communities.**

<p><b>Local Public Awareness Campaigns</b></p>	<p>Educate the public on the issue by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making public service announcements on radio and television.</li> <li>• Publishing op-ed articles in local newspapers.</li> </ul> <p>Increase citizen awareness about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signs of abuse or neglect</li> <li>• How to report suspected cases</li> <li>• Basic infrastructure needed to keep children and families strong</li> <li>• Promote affordable childcare centers, low cost mental health and primary health care clinics, and flexible family-friendly workplace policies</li> </ul>
<p><b>Community Initiatives to Support At-Risk Families</b></p>	<p>Offer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prenatal support programs for pregnant girls and women</li> <li>• Home visiting programs for new parents</li> <li>• Parenting education programs</li> <li>• Mental health and substance abuse treatment for parents</li> <li>• Community violence reduction programs</li> <li>• Curricula for school-aged children to foster skills in protecting themselves from abuse</li> <li>• Youth development programs to strengthen children's resilience</li> </ul>
<p><b>Community Initiatives to Support Recovering Families</b></p>	<p>Offer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent-mentoring programs with stable families serving as role models</li> <li>• Self-help and mutual aid groups to provide non-judgmental support and assistance</li> <li>• Mental health services to improve family communication</li> <li>• Support groups for abuse survivors</li> </ul>

**Strategy: Implement Initiatives and Practices That Improve Early Detection**

<p><b>Building Mandated Reporter Skills</b></p>	<p>Promote the reporting of suspected abuse to DFCS or law enforcement as required by Georgia law (O.C.G.A. § 19-7-5).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandated reporters are physicians, nurses, medical and hospital personnel, dentists, psychologists, counselors, social workers, teachers, school administrators, law enforcement officers, and anyone working with children.</li> </ul> <p>Assist citizens in detecting subtle signs of abuse and neglect by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sponsoring local trainings.</li> <li>• Distributing brochures tailored to each of the mandated groups.</li> <li>• Attending statewide training programs offered by Georgia's Office of the Child Advocate and other agencies.</li> </ul>
<p><b>School Based Initiatives</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess school-aged children for abuse, neglect or other violence in the home.</li> <li>• Work more closely with students who are in special education programs, are failing, have been disciplined, or are truant.</li> <li>• Establish more multi-disciplinary collaborative groups specifically to work with at-risk children.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Domestic Violence Prevention</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support earlier detection of domestic violence.</li> <li>• Assess battered women and their children immediately after an incident or arrest.</li> <li>• Encourage battered women to come forward by providing safety and protection for them and their children.</li> </ul>

**Many professionals are not trained to recognize the signs of abuse or neglect.**

**Strategy: Implement Early Intervention Strategies for Children and Families**

<b>Establish a Child Advocacy Center</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitate a multidisciplinary approach to the investigation, prosecution, and treatment of child abuse cases.</li> <li>Offer a safe, child-friendly place to collect forensic evidence, conduct interviews, and provide psychotherapy and support for victims and non-offending family members.</li> </ul>
<b>Support Domestic Violence Victims and their Children</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish safe places, transitional housing, services and support groups to offer non-offending caregivers and their children a hopeful future as a united family.</li> </ul>
<b>Recruit New Foster and Adoptive Parents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Build support for Georgia's First Lady Mary Perdue's "Our Children Campaign" and efforts to recruit more families for children.</li> <li>Urge adults to serve as adoptive or foster parents or be respite foster parents to "pinch-hit" for biological and other foster parents.</li> </ul>
<b>Establish a "Safe Place" for Youth in Crisis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Join a national network of "Safe Place" locations—youth friendly businesses, schools, fire stations, libraries, Boys &amp; Girls Clubs, YMCAs, and other appropriate public places that display a distinctive yellow and black Safe Place sign.</li> <li>Safe Place staff or volunteers offer assistance with transportation to counseling, finding a place to stay, or locating other resources.</li> </ul>

**Child abuse and neglect could be identified at an earlier point if children and families are comprehensively assessed when related problems surface.**

**A multi-disciplinary approach is needed to working with victims and non-offending caregivers.**

**Visit the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect**  
<http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov>

**Resources**

**The Barton Child Law & Policy Clinic**  
 Emory University School of Law  
 Gambrell Hall  
 Atlanta, GA 30322  
 404-727-6664  
[www.childwelfare.net](http://www.childwelfare.net)

**Georgia Court Appointed Special Advocates, Inc.**  
 1776 Peachtree Rd. NW, Suite 219, South Tower  
 Atlanta, GA 30309  
 800-251-4012  
[www.gacasa.org](http://www.gacasa.org)

**Children's Advocacy Centers of Georgia**  
 P. O. Box 1192  
 Decatur, GA 30031-1192  
 404-377-6127  
[www.cacga.org](http://www.cacga.org)

**Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence**  
 3420 Norman Berry Drive, Suite 280  
 Atlanta, GA 30354  
 404-209-0280  
[www.gcadv.org](http://www.gcadv.org)

**Georgia DHR Division of Family & Children Services**  
 2 Peachtree Street, NW, Suite 19-490  
 Atlanta, GA 30303  
 404-657-7660  
<http://dfcs.dhr.georgia.gov/portal/site>

**Georgia Office of the Child Advocate**  
 3300 Northside Drive, Suite 100  
 Macon, GA 31210  
 800-254-2064  
[www.state.ga.us/gachildadvocate](http://www.state.ga.us/gachildadvocate)

**First Lady's Our Children's Campaign**  
 Office of First Lady Mary Perdue  
 Georgia State Capitol  
 Atlanta, GA 30334  
 866-786-6661  
[www.gov.state.ga.us/summit\\_fl/index.shtml](http://www.gov.state.ga.us/summit_fl/index.shtml)

**Prevent Child Abuse Georgia**  
 1720 Peachtree Street, NW, Suite 600  
 Atlanta, GA 30309  
 800-CHILDREN  
[www.preventchildabusega.org](http://www.preventchildabusega.org)

**Georgia Children's Trust Fund Commission**  
 1720 Peachtree Street NW, Suite 912N  
 Atlanta, GA 30309  
 404-206-6043  
[www.gactfc.com](http://www.gactfc.com)

**YMCA National Safe Place**  
 2411 Bowman Avenue  
 Louisville, KY 40217  
 888-290-7233  
[www.safeplaceservices.org](http://www.safeplaceservices.org)

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
 Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau (2000, 2003)**  
 370 L'Enfant Promenade, S.W.  
 Washington, D.C. 20201  
[www.acf.hhs.gov](http://www.acf.hhs.gov)

## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Annual Child Maltreatment Reports, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau; KIDS COUNT  
<http://georgiafamilyconnection.org/kidscount/kidscountfm.html>
- <sup>2</sup> Danette Joslyn-Gaul, *Georgia's Responsibility Toward Children in Foster Care: A Reference Manual*, Barton Child Law and Policy Clinic Emory Law School, 2004,  
[www.childwelfare.net/resources/FCResponsibility/GAFCRResponsibilityManual20050216.pdf](http://www.childwelfare.net/resources/FCResponsibility/GAFCRResponsibilityManual20050216.pdf)
- <sup>3</sup> *Child Maltreatment 2003*
- <sup>4</sup> *Child Maltreatment 2003*
- <sup>5</sup> *Protective Services Data System Draft Annual Report 2003*, Georgia Department of Human Resources, Division of Family and Children Services, 2004. [http://dfcs.dhr.georgia.gov/DHR-DFCS/DHR-DFCS\\_CommonFiles/28822306PSDS\\_2003\\_Report\\_Draft.pdf](http://dfcs.dhr.georgia.gov/DHR-DFCS/DHR-DFCS_CommonFiles/28822306PSDS_2003_Report_Draft.pdf)
- <sup>6</sup> H. Lien Bragg, *Child Protection in Families Experiencing Domestic Violence*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003  
<http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolence.pdf>
- <sup>7</sup> Jill Goldman & Marsha Salus
- <sup>8</sup> *Blending Perspectives and Building Common Ground: A Report to Congress on Substance Abuse and Child Protection*, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1999  
<http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/subabuse99/subabuse.htm>,
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- <sup>11</sup> Jill Goldman & Marsha Salus
- <sup>12</sup> Jeff Latimer, *The Consequences of Child Maltreatment: A Reference Guide for Health Practitioners*, Family Violence Prevention Unit, Health Canada  
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- <sup>13</sup> *Long-term Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004  
[http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/factsheets/long\\_term\\_consequences.pdf](http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/factsheets/long_term_consequences.pdf)
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid
- <sup>18</sup> Suzette From, *Total Estimated Cost of Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States*, Prevent Child Abuse America 2001 [www.preventchildabuse.org/learn\\_more/research\\_docs/cost\\_analysis.pdf](http://www.preventchildabuse.org/learn_more/research_docs/cost_analysis.pdf)