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How child abuse hotlines hurt the very children they're trying to protect

Anonymous callers make unsubstantiated accusations all the time. Once CPS gets involved, families get trapped.



By Dale Margolin Cecka May 6, 2015

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The recent media obsession with “free range” parenting has illuminated a policy issue which rarely affects parents who debate free range parenting: the exploitation of child abuse reporting hotlines.

Each year, about 3.4 million calls are made to these state-run phone lines. Tragically, only a fraction of these calls are made by trained professionals reporting actual abuse or neglect. The others are made, often anonymously, by people who don't know what constitutes abuse (or, more nefariously, by those who want to punish the parent). But because child protective service agencies are required to act, these calls can result in innocent parents losing their kids, tangling families in a complicated system.

Some people, like teachers or doctors, are required to call a hotline if they suspect a child is being abused or neglected. These “mandated reporters,” who place approximately 60 percent of all hotline calls, receive extensive training on how to identify abuse. Anonymous callers, in contrast, make an allegation and then hang up the phone. This is troubling for several reasons.

For one thing, the public is not trained to identify actual signs of neglect, abuse or maltreatment. As a result, people who think they are being good Samaritans may mistakenly call a family to the attention of the authorities. One family in Arizona was living in an unpainted house with unfinished flooring, but they had a certificate of habitability from the county. A passerby made an anonymous report, which led to CPS banging on their door with armed police officers. The officials had a 40-minuted stand-off with the parents in front of the children, and eventually searched the entire house, even though they had no warrant or court order. False reporting, often during divorce and custody battles, also occurs and is very difficult to deter. A study of anonymous public reports found that nationally, only 1.5 percent of all reports are both anonymous and substantiated.

Unfortunately, once a call comes in, parents aren't given the benefit of the doubt. CPS agencies are required by law to investigate every call. Although parents are not required by law to let them in, a refusal sometimes has devastating consequences.

In Michigan, parents left their younger children home for a night under the care of their older siblings, who were 17 and 16. An anonymous report was made. The police came to the home. The 17-year-old refused to let the police in the house because they did not have a warrant. He was threatened with arrest if he did not cooperate, and the police eventually threw him in jail. CPS took the younger children from the home. The family's pastor bailed the 17-year-old out of jail at 3 in the morning. The other children were not returned home until two days later, after the neglect allegations were unsubstantiated in court.

These hotline practices can result in unnecessary trauma to parents and children. In Texas, a family had lost their apartment after the father lost his job as a welder. They were living temporarily in a spacious storage shed, which had air conditioning and a refrigerator, because they felt that the local homeless shelter was unsafe. A passerby made a call, a caseworker appeared at the shed, and the state immediately took custody of the children without offering any preventive services. A court hearing was not set for two months. During those two months, the parents were only allowed to visit their children for less than an hour a day.

Hotline practices also disproportionately affect poor people of color. Many studies show the disparate treatment of minorities and impoverished families in the child welfare system. Black children are twice as likely to be reported as white children, while minority parents are more likely to receive higher levels of state intervention following a report.

Unnecessary investigation of families diverts resources from an already overburdened system. There are half a million children in foster care and approximately 6.2 million children receive CPS investigations each year.

It's not even clear that reporting by lay people, particularly anonymously, has done any good. Over the past 20 years, the nation has experienced drastic declines in both sexual and physical abuse. But anonymous reporting has played no role in the steep declines. In fact, the percentage of anonymous reports are down slightly since the 1990s. The Justice Department contends that authorities now know about the majority of serious youth victimizations. This is because of better violence and maltreatment prevention, increased incarceration of offenders, improvements in our mental health system, cultural changes, and more self-reporting by youth.

Given these facts, it's time for the elimination of anonymous reporting by the public to child abuse hotlines. (Anonymity, of course, is different than confidentiality. All hotline calls are, and should be, confidential. This means that a caller provides his or her name, but Child Protective Services will only release the caller's identification under very specific circumstances usually requiring a court order.)

The criminal justice system does not permit lay people to make completely anonymous reports. Even programs such as Crime Stoppers assign callers ID numbers. Before arresting or detaining anyone on the basis of any anonymous tip, police must also corroborate aspects of the allegation made by the confidential caller. CPS has an opposite mandate: It must visit a home after an anonymous call, if the allegations meet the legal definition of "abuse" or "neglect."

Neglect should come to CPS's attention, but professionals who work with children are better positioned to assess the adequacy of a child's care and the need for services. The public should never be allowed to call a hotline, make an allegation and hang up the phone without providing any context or any information about the reporter to the operator.

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