



MY OPINION

BY JENNIFER EVANS MORRIS
PRESIDENT, TEXAS YOUNG LAWYERS ASSOCIATION

Learning to Listen to *The Little Voice*

You probably know someone who was abused as a child. It might be your client, your neighbor, your colleague, your boss, or the person who does your taxes. It might be you.

You may know a child who is being abused today — a child who is too terrified to tell, too loyal to speak up, too alone to help him- or herself. It is a hard reality to accept, but four children die every day from child abuse. For every four children that die, there are more than 18,000 who suffer from neglect or from emotional, physical, or sexual abuse — almost always at the hands of those who are supposed to care for them most: parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, babysitters, and nannies.

Regardless of the type of abuse, it's important to know that the common element in all four types of abuse is the destabilizing effect on children. Children thrive best in a stable, predictable environment where they can be confident that, above all, they are safe and loved. A child experiencing any type of abuse cannot feel safe.

We can and should do something about child abuse. We are required by statute to do something about it. April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month and the Texas Young Lawyers Association (TYLA) is doing something about it, hopefully with your help.

TYLA developed *The Little Voice* to educate the public about its obligation to report suspected child abuse. The project is not just about listening to the little voice of a child when she or he tells us something is wrong. It is also about listening to our own internal voice when it tells us something is wrong. *The Little Voice* — which comprises a 35-minute video, English and Spanish public service announcements (PSAs), and written material — was created to educate all of

TO REPORT CHILD ABUSE

Texas Child Abuse Hotline
(800) 252-5400

Texas Runaway Hotline
(888) 580-HELP (4357)

Texas Youth Hotline
(800) 98-YOUTH (96884)

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services
www.dfps.state.tx.us

us about how to recognize abuse and what to do about it when we suspect it. Through the stories of three brave survivors of abuse and the advice of professionals, the video identifies the four different kinds of abuse, describes how to recognize abuse, and provides information about what to do once it is suspected.

Some signs of abuse are obvious and we know to look for them. Bruises; marks in the pattern of items used to hit a child, such as a hand, iron, or stick; and fearful or skittish behavior caused by quick movements are all telltale signs of abuse. Other signs are more difficult to identify. Children may be withdrawn, avoid caregivers, and have sudden changes in school performance and participation. They may be dirty or dressed in clothing inappropriate for the temperature, attempt to run away or commit suicide, or have unusual knowledge of or interest in sexual acts. These are all signs of different kinds of abuse — neglect, physical, emotional, and sexual. Whatever the signs, we must listen to the little voice that tells us to suspect abuse.

Avoid denial and remain calm.

A common reaction to news as unpleasant and shocking as child abuse is denial. However, if you show signs of

denial to the information a child is telling you, then the child may be afraid to continue and will shut down. You must remain calm and as reassuring as possible.

Don't interrogate.

Let the child explain to you in his or her own words what happened, and do not interrupt. This will only confuse or fluster the child and make it harder to tell a story that is already difficult to explain.

Reassure the child that he or she did nothing wrong.

It takes a lot for a child to come forward about abuse. You need to reassure the child that you are listening to them and taking the allegations seriously, and that what happened to them is not their fault.

Safety comes first.

If you feel your safety or the child's safety is currently being threatened by the abuser, contact the authorities immediately and let them handle the situation.

We want as many people as possible to learn about our statutory obligation to report suspected child abuse. Throughout April, National Child Abuse Prevention Month, TYLA will be working hard across the state to publicize *The Little Voice* PSAs. If you have a local or statewide contact with a television station, radio station, network, or movie theater, let us know by contacting us through our website, www.tyla.org/thelittlevoice and if you know a school, child care center, church, or other organization that cares for children and could benefit from our video describing how to recognize abuse, please let us know.

Together, we can all save lives by listening to *The Little Voice*. 🌟