

Family Dog Nabs Child Abuser. Why "Gut Feelings" Have Value When Preventing Child Abuse

The VIRTUS® Programs

A couple caught their babysitter abusing their baby after their dog began acting aggressively toward the woman.

The 22-year-old babysitter had a clean background check and seemed like she would be "a good fit for the job" during the interview process. However, the father said that "[a]bout five months into her being our babysitter, we started to notice that our dog was very defensive of our son when she would come in the door."

Their dog's behavior prompted the couple to hide a smartphone to record the babysitter while they were away. The phone's camera captured the babysitter verbally and physically abusing the child.

Police arrested the babysitter, who pleaded guilty to charges of assault and battery. The sitter will go to jail, and be registered as a child abuser. The dog declined an interview. Paul Ciampanelli, "Dog Saves Child From Babysitter Abuse," pawnation.com (Sept. 12, 2013).

Evidence of child abuse at the hands of a caretaker can come from many sources, and parents should be vigilant and investigate any signs of suspicious behavior.

One of the most important things a safe adult can do is to avoid explaining away warning signs—even signs from pets. Reasonable suspicion, including reasonable suspicions about other adults who have access to your children, is healthy and necessary to help keep children safe from abuse.

It is also important to perform a thorough background check before hiring a caretaker, even though in this particular case the background check showed no problems. Therefore, keep in mind that a clean background check is not a guarantee the employee will not abuse your child, because a background check will not provide information about the bad acts of a person who has not been caught. Stay vigilant. Watch for any signs of abuse and take immediate action to report your suspicions to law enforcement or children's services if you have reason to believe abuse is occurring.

If using a childcare facility, check that the facility is licensed and that all persons who have access to your child, whether employees or volunteers, have passed a criminal background check. Ask if children are supervised at all times. Drop in unannounced. If this is forbidden, look for another facility.

Once a caregiver is selected, the family should be alert to any changes in the child's behavior. A child, who suddenly becomes withdrawn, clingy, or reluctant to be with their caregiver, may be experiencing abuse. Talk with your children and encourage them to be open about their feelings. Keep in mind the abuse may be verbal, physical, or involve neglect.

Other signs of child abuse or neglect include: when a child is always thirsty or hungry after spending time with the caregiver; being listless; showing signs of injuries that are not cared for; having unexplained bruises or burns; suddenly showing fear of adults; becoming aggressive and

throwing tantrums; persistently complaining about headaches or stomachaches; having frequent nightmares; or experiencing developmentally inappropriate bedwetting.

Here are some steps parents can take to protect their children from babysitter abuse:

- Occasionally check in unannounced on your caretaker or childcare facility.
- If a caretaker is watching your child in an environment other than your home, make sure it is child-proofed and safe.
- Watch for signs of substance abuse, which could make your babysitter more likely to abuse or neglect your child.
- Require personal and professional references when choosing a caretaker or childcare facility, and ask about any instances of suspected abuse.
- Ask people you know and trust to provide a referral for a caregiver.
- Consider installing cameras in areas of the home children use most frequently, such as living areas or their bedrooms, so you can monitor how caregivers treat your children.
- If you do install cameras, do not install cameras in areas where caretakers would expect to have privacy, such as the bathroom.
- Check laws in your area to determine if hidden cameras are legal to use.
- Informing your caregiver of the use of cameras before hiring can act as a deterrent.

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