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*Patrick Lake*

A child who is unusually shy and withdrawn. A child who often has bruises on her face. A child who is not dressed for the weather. A child who regularly shows up at school without his lunch.

These are just a few of the signs that a child may be neglected or abused.

If you witness these or other signs that make you think a child may be in harm's way, please call York Children's Aid Society at 905-895-2318.

Now, here's something you might not know. The operative word in that sentence is "may"... signs that a child may be neglected or abused.

You don't need proof. You don't even need to be sure. You just need to be concerned. And you don't even have to identify yourself.

When you call, we will want to hear your observations – what you have seen and heard that makes you think a child may be at risk. A trained and experienced staff member will talk with you to determine whether the situation requires an assessment.

Very often, people who phone worry that they're over-reacting.

They ask "Is this something I should be reporting?"

The truth is, we welcome all calls because, in most cases, we would never learn about child who is at risk unless and until someone picks up the phone.

Last year, we worked with 5,000 families. In a vast majority of cases, we are able to work with the family to create a healthy environment for the children. It may only be a matter of explaining the law with respect to discipline.

Sometimes it's a matter of helping a family struggling with serious issues like addiction or poverty. And sometimes frustrated parents without family or friends just need a connection to other parents so they don't feel so alone.

After all, the vast majority of parents – even those who have been reported – genuinely want to be good parents. They may need our help because they are simply over-taxed.

In only four per cent of those 5,000 cases did the children have to be removed from the home in order to resolve the situation?

Every October, Children's Aid Societies across Ontario reach out to the community to ask each and every person to 'Use Your Voice' to speak out for children who are at risk.

Here in York Region, we marked the campaign with an exhibition of art created by the children we serve. Their paintings show 'Home & Family' – happy stories of lives made better because someone noticed that things were not right and called the CAS.

On behalf of the vulnerable children of our community, I ask that you call York CAS at 905-895-2318 if you suspect neglect or abuse and help us rebuild a family.

*Pat Lake is the executive director of the York Region Children's Aid Society.*