

# RESEARCH

## TEACHERS AND CHILD ABUSE

—by Kathleen Casey

### Introduction

As institutions serving children of every race, creed, ethnic, and socio-economic group, schools are ideal settings in which to combat the widespread problem of child abuse. Teachers are the primary agents in this struggle. Because they have frequent, ongoing, and long-term contact with children, teachers have the opportunity, as well as the legal mandate, to report any child they suspect as being abused and/or neglected. In addition to their responsibility for identifying and reporting child abuse, teachers also play a pivotal role in preventing child abuse and neglect. Moreover, by resolving not to use corporal punishment, and modelling non-violent conflict resolution, educators create an environment conducive to the overall well-being of children.

In light of the enormous burden placed upon teachers as key actors in identifying, reporting, and preventing child abuse, research has suggested some disturbing trends. First, while the number of reports of child abuse continues to increase, the preparation of teachers to confront the problem remains inadequate. In one survey of teachers in Illinois, 81% of the teachers responding reported that they had received no child abuse information during college; 66% had received no education on abuse and neglect during in-service training (McIntyre, 1987).

Additionally, only 21% of the teachers reported that they were "very aware" of the signs of physical abuse, 19% of emotional abuse, and 30% of physical abuse and neglect. Seventy-six percent indicated that they would be unable to recognize indicators of sexual abuse. Another study of teachers in Atlanta indicated that 68% of the teachers responding had only received three or fewer hours of education about child abuse (Hazzard, 1984).

Another source of concern involves the apparent failure of teachers to report suspected cases of child abuse. Although 57% of the over 2.1 million reports of child abuse and neglect in 1986 involved school-aged children, only 16.3% of all reports originated from school personnel (AAPC, 1988). Further, the most recent National Incidence Study found that only 24% of suspected child abuse and neglect cases known to school personnel were reported to child protective services for formal intervention (Westat, 1988). From the limited amount of research examining educators as agents in the struggle against child abuse, several questions emerge:

\* What education on identifying, reporting, and preventing child abuse are

teachers provided in order to address this problem?

\* How sufficient do teachers feel this education is in enabling them to address child abuse issues?

\* How frequently do teachers encounter and subsequently report suspected cases of child abuse and neglect?

\* What are the policies of schools with respect to reporting child abuse and neglect?

\* What are some of the barriers to teachers' willingness to file a report on child abuse and neglect?

\* What are teachers' views concerning child assault prevention programs, and what are the scope and extent of the school policies concerning these programs?

\* What are teachers' views on the use of corporal punishment in the classroom and other prevention issues? The answers to these and other questions were sought through a National Teacher Survey (NTS) conducted by the National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research, a program of the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse (NCPA).

### Method

The NTS drew its sample from the random stratified 29 counties utilized in the federally funded National Incidence Study (NIS), including both urban and rural communities throughout the U.S. (Westat, 1988). In each of these 29 counties, with the exception of those with only one unified school district, both the largest and smallest school districts were contacted. Approximately 1,694 questionnaires mailed to the school districts and 575 surveys were completed; of these 568 were completed by elementary or middle school teachers. This represents a response rate of approximately 34%. The respondents included 501 females (88%), 47 males (8%), and 20 (4%) who did not indicate their gender. The mean age of the sample was 40 years. The responding teachers were geographically distributed across the nation with 27% in the Northeast, 19% in the Midwest, 40% in the South, and 14% in the Southwest. Of the 568 teachers in the sample, 20% taught first grade, 9% second, 22% third, 17% fourth, 12% fifth, 16% sixth, and 1% special education.

### Survey Findings.

*Teacher Education.* Results of the NTS reveal that, overall, teachers are receiving little education on identifying, reporting, and intervening in suspected cases of child abuse and neglect. Only 49% of teachers reported that their schools provided in-service workshops on child abuse and neglect related topics. Of those teachers who had been offered such workshops, 62% reported that the in-services were mandatory for all teachers, but were typically offered only once a year or on an "as needed" basis. Only half of all teachers (51%) reported

that their school circulates any written material on child abuse and neglect.

In view of the minimal level of child abuse information NTS educators reported receiving, it is by no means surprising that the majority of teachers (approximately 66%) felt that the child abuse education provided them by their school was not sufficient in enabling them to identify cases of abuse. Even considering only those teachers who reported actually receiving in-service workshops, approximately half believed such brief instruction was not enough.

*Reporting behavior.* The pervasiveness of child abuse and neglect was attested to by the almost three-quarters (74%) of the NTS sample who indicated that they had suspected a child of having been abused or neglected at one time or another. Of the teachers who noted that they suspected child maltreatment, 90% indicated that they reported the case, a surprisingly high figure in light of previous research. These reports were most commonly made to other school system personnel such as the school principal, social worker, or nurse. Only about 23% of teachers indicated reporting cases directly to CPS, a figure consistent with the NIS finding (Westat, 1988).

The fact that so many teachers in the NTS sample reported suspected cases of abuse is interesting to note when considering that only 57% indicated that their school district had a clearly-defined procedure for identifying and reporting suspected child abuse and neglect cases. Furthermore, it is particularly striking that 24% of the teachers were not even aware if their school had such a procedure.

*Barriers to child abuse reporting.* Because previous research has shown that school personnel report only a small percentage of the child abuse and neglect cases reported, the NTS queried teachers on their perceptions of potential barriers to consistent reporting. Two-thirds of the teachers (65%) felt that a significant obstacle was the lack of sufficient knowledge on how to detect and report cases of child abuse and neglect, and 63% indicated that the fear of legal ramifications for false allegations may impede their reporting. More general fears concerned the consequence of reporting (52%), such as reprisals against the child and damage to parent-teacher and teacher-child relationships. Other potential barriers included parental denial and disapproval of reports (45%), interference in parent-child relationships and family privacy (35%), lack of community or school support in making such allegations (24%), and school board or principal disapproval (14%).

*Child assault prevention programs.* Despite controversy over the efficacy and impact of child assault prevention programs, 65% of teachers reported having no reservations about teaching these types of pro-

## OPINION

### THE McMARTIN CASE AND THE PARENTS' DILEMMA

—by Carolyn Moore Newberger

Should parents let their children testify in cases of child sexual abuse? The verdicts from the McMartin Preschool case must telegraph to every parent doubt about whether the agony is worth it. Often in the months following disclosure children appear to be recovering well from their experience, and both they and their parents want nothing more than to put the experience behind them. So why cooperate in a prosecution? Involvement is necessary because there is a need to let people who would hurt children know that they will be held responsible for their actions. Furthermore, people who molest one child appear likely to molest other children unless stopped.

Although testifying is stressful for everyone, testifying is not necessarily bad for a child. Participating in the legal process gives the child an opportunity to tell her story and to make a contribution to serving justice. The McMartin case, however, underscores for parents the uncertainty of our legal system and the potential pain, exposure, and disruption associated with a public trial. Fears that one's child could be devastated by an acquittal are inevitable in the face of such a verdict, and may tip the balance of parents' decision-making away from cooperation with prosecution. I hope this will not be so.

Sincere and courageous acts, even by young children, and even if not successful,

may have positive longer-term effects. In part, this is because major experiences in children's lives, including traumatic experiences, are not lived once, but many times. As children grow older, their capacity to understand experience changes, allowing them to revise earlier impressions. For example, young children are egocentric; they believe that they cause the events in their lives. Thus, preschool children whose parents divorce typically feel that the divorce is their fault. As children grow older, however, parental divorce is usually reinterpreted from a broader perspective, and divorce comes to be understood as a consequence of the parents' own feelings and behavior. During adolescence, children can comprehend social and economic forces which may have put stress on the parents' relationship.

In addition to being egocentric, young children also judge an act by its outcomes rather than by the intentions of the actor. In his studies of the moral development of children, for example, Jean Piaget found that children under the ages of six or seven, when asked whether it is "naughtier" to break fifteen cups by accident or one cup on purpose, replied that breaking more objects was "naughtier." In contrast, older children considered the child who broke one cup on purpose as more blameworthy.

When applied to children testifying in court, developmental theory would suggest that young children judge their testimony, and perhaps themselves, by the outcome of the trial. If a defendant is acquitted, the child may conclude that her testimony was bad and the verdict her failure. Cognitive-developmental theory also suggests, how-

ever, that as children grow older, they become able to understand that testifying in court was an act whose merit lay less in its outcome than in its intentions: to tell the truth and to do one's part in influencing justice. In adolescence, the child should also be able to take a broader, legal perspective to know that acquittal does not prove innocence, but indicates that guilt was not proved beyond a reasonable doubt.

Although children at any age will be outraged and pained by seemingly unjust resolutions, children at all ages can be helped to understand that their testimony was good and important, and that the bad outcome was not their fault. On the other hand, children denied the opportunity to tell their story may later feel disappointment and anger at not having been allowed to try to make a difference.

Whether or not to allow a child to testify is not an easy decision. Each case is different, and every child is different. Parents facing this agonizing decision should obtain, in my view, psychological consultation and legal counsel. In coming to a decision, however, it is important to recognize that the court process, although stressful and uncertain in outcome, may give the child an opportunity to take action on her own behalf, and that development provides renewed opportunities to process that experience and to reach new levels of understanding and resolution.

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grams. Of the teachers with reservations (35%), the most commonly cited reason (64%) was feeling unqualified to implement such programs. The second most common reservation (51%) concerned time restraints. Further, 31% of the teachers surveyed reported feeling uncomfortable with the subject matter. Still, 92% of all teachers felt child sexual assault prevention programs were effective in teaching children how to protect themselves.

**Corporal punishment.** In rating the relative importance of certain activities in preventing abuse, only 64% of teachers indicated that stopping corporal punishment was of above average importance. Only 45% felt that talking with other teachers regarding the use of corporal punishment was of above average importance.

### Conclusion

The findings from the NTS highlight at least four specific areas needing attention from child abuse prevention advocates:

- \* expanded training for teachers and school administrators on the identification

of child abuse and the mandate to report all suspected cases to CPS.

- \* expanded training for teachers on how to effectively support victims of maltreatment independent of any actions CPS may or may not take.

- \* expanded opportunities for teachers to become more familiar and comfortable with the concepts in most child assault prevention curricula.

- \* general education for teachers and the public on the potential dangers of corporal punishment.

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## COMING NEXT ISSUE

The next issue of *The Advisor* will be devoted to burnout among professionals who work with abused children, their families, and perpetrators. Articles will be contributed by **Cynthia Winn** and **Marilyn Peterson** of the University of California at Davis; **Lisa McCann** of the Traumatic Stress Institute in South Windsor, Connecticut; **Dan Sexton** of Childhelp USA; **Sandy Krebs** of the Torrance, California Police Department; **Jon Conte**, of the University of Washington; **Lucy Berliner**, of Harborview Medical Center, and others.