

## The Role of Schools in Addressing Child Abuse and Neglect

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Educators in school settings across the nation serve as a critical first line of defense in assisting with the identification and prevention of child abuse and neglect. Due to the extensive interaction between school personnel and students during the school day, educators have an important opportunity to observe children, establish a reasonable level of suspicion, and report suspected incidents. Educators in this process may play an integral role; however, they tend to lack confidence in their range of knowledge of abuse and their ability to provide appropriate intervention services to victimized children and their families. Consequently, as communities struggle to address the serious social and public health problem of child abuse and neglect, educators often find themselves inadequately prepared to assist child victims in the classroom.

In this issue of the *APSAC Advisor*, two articles focus on the role of schools in addressing child abuse and neglect. Faye McCallum and Bruce Johnson present an Australian perspective on teachers as reporters of maltreatment in their piece, "Decision-Making Processes Used by Teachers in Cases of Suspected Child Abuse." Their discussion highlights the universal and global issues associated with preparing educators to participate in the child protection system. In advocating to "Resolve Educational Problems of Children in Foster Care," Andrea Zetlin, Lois Weinberger, and Roni Tunick explore the subsequent support needed for children in the classroom to optimize their academic functioning. The authors of both articles note that most schools have struggled with the recognition of child victims of maltreatment, have failed to extend special services to abused and neglected children, and have faltered in constructing productive coalitions with families that may serve as a form of protection for the child and support for the parents.

### Educators as Mandated Reporters

Schools have an important responsibility in the protection of children and serve as the system that bridges the family and community into a social network for the child. As a principal recently stated in the investigation of a child fatality, "The schools are the eyes and the ears of the community."

Educators have a legal mandate to report suspected child maltreatment in all 50 states. This responsibility arises from the close interaction between school personnel and children in a professional context that provides an opportunity to observe and intervene for the protection of children and the support of families.

Although the legal requirement amplifies the role of educators as advocates for children, the complex issues that surround abuse and neglect often result in the unrealized potential to use schools as a resource that responds to the needs of child victims. Educators typically remain unclear about applicable laws and reporting procedures

(Baxter & Beer, 1990; McIntyre, 1987; Berson & Berson, 1999). Among professionals who interact with children, teachers are the least knowledgeable about child abuse information (Reiniger, Robison, & McHugh, 1995). Relatively few education training programs require curriculum on child victimization for certification (Berson & Berson, 2001; McEvoy, 1990), and although educators take coursework in child development, they have little exposure to information on family functioning (Berson, Berson, & Wolper, 2001; Friedman & D'Agostino, 1980). The vast majority of teachers have received no training on child abuse during their college education and little to no supplementation of information during inservice training (Berson, Berson, & Wolper, 2001; Hazzard, 1984; McIntyre, 1987; 1990). A lack of adequate knowledge has been identified as a significant barrier to detecting and intervening on behalf of victimized children.

Even when teachers are aware of their mandatory obligations, they are significantly less likely to report abuse than other education professionals (Crenshaw, Crenshaw, & Lichtenberg, 1995). Teachers may be hesitant to report when they believe that (a) parents are justified in their method of discipline, (b) the right to family privacy supercedes community intervention, (c) they may experience professional or personal retribution or legal ramifications, (d) parent-teacher relationships will be adversely affected, or (e) reporting makes no difference in promoting safety for children.

Compliance with mandated child abuse reporting laws also may be adversely impacted by policies and procedures in the school systems. Many school reporting procedures diffuse responsibility to designated reporters; however, this policy may contribute to teachers ignoring their duty to report. If educators believe that the responsibility for reporting abuse lies with the administrator, they may expect someone else to act on suspicions of victimization. Especially problematic is the issue that these models may violate mandatory reporting laws, which often dictate that "mandated reporters remain liable for their suspicions even if they have reported to the designated receiver" (Crenshaw, Crenshaw, & Lichtenberg, 1995, p. 1110). Findings from the Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect and the School Sentinel Questionnaire Follow-up Study concluded that (a) school policies often permit gatekeeping by school officials that perpetuates nonreporting of suspected abuse and (b) there is a tremendous need for improved training.

### Dimension and Scope of Problem

Although more than one half of the children who have been victims of child maltreatment are school age and an estimated 89% of teachers are in contact with abused and neglected children in their classrooms, less than 15% of the filed reports of suspected abuse come from educators (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect [NCCAN], 2000). Teachers typically do not feel equipped to address their evolving role in safeguarding the emotional and physical well-being of children. A general lack of knowledge of child abuse combined with an overburdened staff means that many cases of abuse are overlooked. Detection can be complicated by competing priorities of an intense

work schedule in schools with crowded classrooms (Tite, 1994). Teachers may have little time to engage in intensive reflective observation of individuals in the schools and lack skills in discerning what is a serious injury.

Even more pervasive is a lack of understanding of how to respond when the impact of neglect and abuse affects the educational and socio-emotional development of the child. Confusion over appropriate responses to victimized children has resulted in a pervasive failure by significant adults to protect children and ensure their safety. Even those teachers who have received training in reporting laws and their legal responsibility to act on their suspicions of maltreatment typically report that they lack an understanding of abuse dynamics, family functioning, and child protection systems. In fact, their knowledge base may be clouded by myths about abuse that leave them helpless in the face of children who desperately need competent and caring support networks.

### **Training**

Though many school districts have developed policies and procedures for staff to address their roles as mandated reporters, often lacking are specific training and support on the complex issues of abuse and neglect, which are important supplements to policy manuals and handouts. Similarly, the university training programs fail to specify policies for educator training in child abuse identification, reporting, and intervention.

The necessity of involving educators in the response to child maltreatment is supported by evidence that indicates that child abuse or neglect can contribute to educational and behavioral difficulties in the classroom. In some cases, the abuse is associated with subsequent impairments of children's cognitive, emotional, or behavioral functioning, which necessitates special education services. In other cases, the interaction of a child with a disability and parental/family stressors may contribute to a higher risk of abuse in the home. School-based interventions that are structured without regard for complex family problems fail to optimize the coordination of assistance and support. It is critical that educators understand the multidimensional symptoms and effects of child maltreatment.

School personnel are aware of the gaps in their knowledge, and many are interested in further training to assist them in servicing children. In a study conducted by Berson, Berson, and Wolper (2001), only 23% of teachers indicated that they were very well prepared to report child abuse, and just 10% of preservice teachers noted a high level of preparation in child maltreatment. Overall, teachers and school personnel do not report cases of abuse at a rate that reflects the degree of contact they have with children.

Some studies have found that two-thirds of teacher-initiated reports do not go beyond the principal's attention, and the majority of children in need of help "masquerade as normal so convincingly that their abuse will go completely undetected" (National Child Rights Alliance, 1997). Although preservice education can provide a general foundation of knowledge on child abuse, in service training is

necessary to establish an applied understanding within the context of the local community and school. Moreover, inservice training establishes a district and school culture that values children's well-being and commits to combating child abuse and neglect.

The need for a working knowledge of abuse and neglect is critical for educators to fulfill their basic functions in detecting, responding, reporting, and accessing supportive services for the child. Though it has often been assumed that teachers are in the ideal position for detection, their intense work schedules and the nationwide focus on accountability may distract their attention from close and personal interactions with children, which are needed to recognize the nuances of abuse. Added to an insufficient knowledge base, a reluctance to interfere in family issues, and fear of consequences to the child and themselves, the difficulty of reporting becomes clear.

### **Beyond Reporting: The Implementation of Prevention and Intervention Programs**

Many school districts have established procedures for reporting; however, the intent of the legal mandate is not just to legislate a report, but also to reinforce action for the protection of children. With regard to schools, action can extend to monitoring the intellectual, physical, and socio-emotional functioning of children; creating a supportive and caring climate in the classroom; and offering interventions in conjunction with community agencies. Despite their extensive access to children, many educators have not realized their opportunity to intervene on behalf of a maltreated child. Overall, educators reported a limited understanding of ways to work with abused children in the classroom. Formal training is infrequent and limited. Moreover, it tends to focus on indicators of abuse for identification and places little emphasis on intervention skills for dealing with families in crisis.

This identified need presents an opportunity to introduce developmental interventions to educators that empower abused and neglected children with constructive problem-solving skills and build on their strengths, interests, and capacity to cope with stress. Teachers need to create a classroom environment that is safe, nurturing, and responsive to the needs of an abused child. Children's ability to achieve is impacted by fulfillment of these basic needs and can be accomplished by communication and conflict management strategies to provide alternatives to rage, violence, and despair. Thus, the classroom needs to foster a strength-based orientation and approach so that academic success may contribute to resilience.

### **Preventing and Intervening in the Victimization of Children**

To ensure that all schools have an effective and caring approach to intervention, we need community-wide planning that involves families and neighborhood agencies in forming comprehensive plans and coordinating interagency services. Educators need guidance in recognizing the broader response needed to respond to suspected child abuse and neglect. Obligations of educators extend beyond the legal mandate of reporting and include the professional dictate of fostering intellectual and emotional development. This can be

achieved by observing a child's strengths, skills, interests, talents, and methods of coping with distress as well as assuring appropriate interventions that respond to the child's academic challenges and demands (Barrett-Kruse, Martinez, & Carll, 1998). Effective intervention offers empowerment of young victims with constructive problem-solving skills and caring, supportive contexts. Beyond the legal responsibility to report abuse, teachers have opportunities to create classroom environments where all children feel safe, valued, and respected (Lowenthal, 1996).

When child-serving professionals structure a role for educators in a multidisciplinary partnership between school, community, mental health, medical, social service, and law enforcement professionals, teachers report increased levels of certainty in their identification of abuse. They also minimize perceived costs of reporting while maximizing benefits (Berson & Berson, 2001). Resources dedicated to the development and sustenance of collaborative partnerships among families, educators, and community agencies are necessary not only to engage educators in their mandated responsibility as reporters, but also to lead comprehensive school-based interventions that prevent and treat child maltreatment and its consequences.

Schools cannot address issues of abuse and neglect in isolation. Without adequate systems of care that offer support and interventions, educators may resort to further perpetuation of policies of containment and control as social stressors take their toll on fragile children. Interagency collaboration and the pooling of resources are critical. Establishing a collaborative endeavor that includes multidisciplinary groups and education programs may bridge the rift between teacher training and practice standards. In this way, we can meet the needs of children victimized by abuse. With the assistance of community partnerships, educators, who may be among the first professionals to interact with a child during and following victimization, may learn to (a) serve as informed resources by being knowledgeable about child abuse and neglect; (b) respond appropriately to the disclosure of abuse, including accessing crisis intervention for the child; (c) react appropriately to emotional and behavioral indicators of abuse in the classroom setting; (d) report suspected abuse to the proper authorities; and (e) collaborate with community agencies and resource providers in responding to suspected maltreatment. Together educators, other child-serving professionals, parents, and students can build an alliance and thus ensure that the best interests of children are promoted through a culture of caring in the schools.



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