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Child abuse reporting: teachers' perceived deterrents

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Abstract

Objective: There are three general objectives: First, to determine the number of reports of abuse made by teachers, their knowledge of child abuse laws and reporting procedures, and their perceived deterrents in reporting abuse; second, to determine if there were gender or ethnic differences in reporting; and third, to evaluate teachers responses to case vignettes.

Method: A survey of 197 teachers was conducted. They were given a questionnaire that included demographic information, knowledge of child abuse laws and procedures, and two scenarios of legally reportable child abuse.

Results: Seventy-three percent of this sample reported that they had never made a report of child abuse, while those who had made reports made an average of one report. Only 11% of teachers reported that there were instances in which they believed abuse may have occurred, but failed to report. Additionally, these teachers felt that their pre- and post-service training did not adequately prepare them for abuse reporting. The most common reasons cited for not reporting abuse were fear of making an inaccurate report, feeling as though child protective services do not help families, and no apparent physical signs of abuse. There were no gender differences in reporting. The teachers' responses to the case vignettes were not consistent with their previous reports.

Conclusions: In general, most teachers reported having never made a child abuse report. Although only a small percentage of teachers reported failing to report abuse, when presented with legally reportable case vignettes, many failed to report. The majority of teachers report receiving inadequate training in child abuse signs, symptoms, and reporting procedure. There is an obvious need for more education for teachers that addresses their perceived deterrents and aids them in feeling more confident in making reports of child abuse. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Introduction

Congress recognized the serious nature of childhood abuse and passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, Public Law 93–247, in 1974 (Wilson, Thomas, & Schuette, 1983). States followed this action by establishing mandatory reporting laws for some professions. In all 51 US jurisdictions, school teachers and administrators are mandated to report child abuse and neglect to child protective services (Bavolek, 1983; Crenshaw, Crenshaw, & Lichtenberg, 1995). In 1996, child protective agencies received and investigated over 2 million reports of alleged child abuse and neglect (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1999).

All states have legislation requiring that certain professionals report child abuse. In all states, teachers are included as mandated reporters. Although laws vary from state to state, there are several commonalities including who must report and in what instances (i.e., suspicion of abuse) (Kalichman, 1993). The Florida reporting guidelines require that teachers report directly to child protective services. In addition to this mandate, some school districts require that teachers also then report to school administration.

School teachers increased their reporting nearly threefold after the legislative change mandating reporting, which made teachers the source of almost one quarter of all reports of sexual abuse (Kalichman, 1993). Despite their increase in reporting, educators are known to be reluctant to report in many instances. Public schools, which are the single greatest source of reports nationwide to child protective services, still have more cases unreported than those that are reported to child protective services by all other services combined (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). Thus, ironically, schools make the most reports and at the same time, fail to report the most child abuse cases (Crenshaw et al., 1995). The National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) reports that 16% of all reports of maltreatment come from educational personnel (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1999).

In a national sample of teachers, Abrahams, Casey, and Daro (1992) found that 74% of the sample stated they had suspected a child of being abused or neglected at one time. Of these teachers, 90% indicated that they reported the case. However, in the majority of the cases (87%), the teachers reported the abuse to a school official or counselor; very few made direct reports to child protective agencies (Abrahams et al., 1992). Shoop and Firestone (1988) conducted a study of 103 school personnel (all grade levels) in the midwest. Not one of the teachers had reported directly to child protective services, although the majority of them stated that they would generally report suspected abuse to their principal. Most studies fail to ask teachers how many reports they have made, so conclusions are difficult to draw.

Teachers play an important role in the detection and reporting of child abuse. By virtue of their work, they have ongoing contact with children, thus placing them in a unique position to detect signs of child abuse (Abrahams et al., 1992). In addition, teachers are well placed to make observations of children on a daily basis and compare current behavior with peer norms and/or past behavior (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

Clearly child abuse is occurring and teachers are observing it, but there appear to be significant barriers to abuse reporting. “Most explanations for this substantial rate of unreported abuse have been inconsistent and incomplete” (Brosig & Kalichman, 1992, p. 486).

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