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# MALTREATMENT OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES: TRAINING NEEDS FOR A COLLABORATIVE RESPONSE

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## ABSTRACT

**Problem Statement:** There is a dearth of research on how to respond to children with disabilities who have been maltreated. The literature that does exist recommends a collaborative team approach, with each team member possessing a broad understanding of the special considerations of working with children with disabilities. The literature does not define current understanding levels of response team members in comparison to essential knowledge levels.

**Method:** The current study used a needs assessment instrument tailored to each of three key groups: parents, educators, and investigators. Respondents were asked about their knowledge level, experience with, and training interests on maltreatment of children with disabilities.

**Results:** While respondents seemed to have a cursory awareness in some of the topic areas, their knowledge levels were not extensive in most of the survey areas. A majority of respondents were willing to attend training, and all three groups ranked the recognition of maltreatment of children with disabilities as a top training priority.

**Conclusions:** It was concluded that these integral players in the response to maltreatment of children with disabilities are receptive to becoming more effective partners, by attending training to bridge the knowledge gaps they possess. The current study helps document the nature of those knowledge gaps and, thereby informs the development of training programs for building a more coordinated and informed response to maltreatment of children with disabilities. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd

*Key Words*—Child maltreatment, Abuse and neglect, Disabilities, Training.

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Note: The term maltreatment is used to include all forms of child abuse and neglect.

To obtain a copy of the survey instruments described in the study, contact the Virginia Institute for Developmental Disabilities at Virginia Commonwealth University (VIDD) at Post Office Box 843020, Richmond, VA 23284–3020 and reference National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect Grant #90CA162301.

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## BACKGROUND

### *Overview*

STORIES ABOUT THE maltreatment of children with disabilities can be traced as far back as the Neanderthal Period (Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 1996), and recent studies from around the world suggest that child maltreatment is unfortunately common in the lives of “many, probably most, people with developmental disabilities” (Sobsey, 1994, p. 3). The National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN, now the Office of Child Abuse and Neglect or OCAN) conducted the first and only national effort to determine the actual scope of maltreatment among children with disabilities in 1991. The results suggested the incidence of maltreatment among children with disabilities to be 1.7 times higher than the incidence of maltreatment of children without disabilities (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect [NCCAN], 1993).

While the causes of abuse and neglect of children with disabilities are generally the same as for children as a whole (Ammerman & Baladerian, 1993), unique factors contribute to the overrepresentation of children with disabilities in maltreatment reports. Aspects of certain disabilities place some children in an even more vulnerable position in protecting themselves than children without disabilities (Ammerman & Baladerian, 1993). Also, devaluing attitudes toward children and toward people with disabilities contribute to the incidence of maltreatment (Ammerman & Baladerian, 1993; Sobsey, 1994). Flaws in the systems that respond to maltreatment of children with disabilities are also included in the list of causal factors of this phenomenon. For instance, Sobsey highlights how training of relevant child welfare and disability professionals is a critical element missing in attempts to prevent maltreatment of children with disabilities. The current study examines the role of training inadequacies in maltreatment of children with disabilities and, conversely, how the training of staff might be an effective measure in prevention and intervention efforts.

### *Literature on Prevention and Intervention*

H. Rutherford Turnbull, Co-Director of the Beach Center on Families and Disability, noted in the report on the 1994 National Symposium on Abuse and Neglect of Children with Disabilities that, “It’s a mistake to blame people in the systems, but it is not a mistake to look hard at the systems within which we operate and to say, ‘It’s not good enough, it’s too late, too little of one thing, too much of another’” (National Symposium on Abuse and Neglect of Children with Disabilities, 1995, p. 4). Participants of the Symposium did, in fact, closely examine what is and is not working to prevent and reduce maltreatment, and they made suggestions for effective interventions and policies. Out of the 17 recommendations emerging from the Symposium, two are particularly relevant to the current study. First, collaboration across all professions was recognized for its importance in increasing service effectiveness, highlighting the fact that, “There’s no one professional group that has all the wisdom associated with this problem” (National Symposium on Abuse and Neglect of Children with Disabilities, 1995, p. 16). The second recommendation recognized that levels of knowledge about this issue vary across professions, pointing to the need for training. As the report noted, “The training usually provided is discipline specific and contributes to the continuation of fragmented and uncoordinated services” (p. 17).

In a National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse (NCPCA) report on maltreatment of children with disabilities, Ammerman and Baladerian (1993) also cited training as a critical area in prevention of abuse and neglect in children with disabilities, and suggested “ignorance” among professionals as one reason for continued maltreatment. Building on the premise of the need for adequate training, Sobsey (1994) advocates for the team approach in preventing and intervening in child maltreatment, particularly concerning children with disabilities. Often called “action systems” (p. 347), child protection teams may include various combinations of professional and nonprofessional members, such as people with disabilities and their families; child protection workers;

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