



## ABC'S FOR TEACHERS WHO SUSPECT CHILD ABUSE

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Last year, I received a frantic phone call on the NRCCSA's toll-free Information Service line from a first-year teacher to whom a child had disclosed abuse. The teacher was employed by a preschool academy in a very affluent suburb and was afraid to report the incident for fear of losing her job. She was also unaware of how the school policies and procedures required these situations to be handled. "What should I do?" she said.

Having been in a similar situation while teaching in a public school system, I could identify with the teacher's position. She had to take some type of action on behalf of the child, but hopefully not at the expense of her job.

Although we do not give advice, I explained that teachers are mandated by law in all 50 states and U.S. territories to report suspicions of child abuse and neglect to Child Protective Services (CPS) or law enforcement. I also mailed her a copy of her state's civil child abuse and neglect reporting laws and information on indicators of child sexual abuse. However, that did not relieve me of a feeling of dread for both the novice educator and the young child.

The most important guideline is to be alert to children's body language and changes in their behavior. Is a child who has previously been well-behaved now causing problems for no apparent reason? Does a child seem to find reasons to stay after school rather than go home or to a caretaker's house? Is the child wearing inappropriate clothing which would hide bruises?

Teachers who suspect child abuse should follow the school's reporting procedures. This will protect the teacher from legal trouble and enable the child to receive help more quickly. For instance, one teacher told of having a young child who barely spoke English come to class wearing a turtleneck sweater. This wouldn't have been strange except that it was the deep South in the middle of May and the school had no air conditioning. The child also appeared to have bruises on his neck, so the teacher rolled down the neck of the sweater, revealing red and purple bruises. When she pointed to the bruises, the child said, "My Papa." The teacher then called the father in and discussed the bruises with him.

The father, who was from another country and culture, said that the bruises were the result of a type of "medical" practice used in his home country. He said that his wife, who had yet to come to this country, usually administered the treatment and that his touch was not as gentle as hers. The teacher explained that school policy required her to report suspected child abuse to authorities. However, she told the father that she would not report the bruises as long as she never saw any more on the child.

*(continued on reverse)*

It is important to remember that it is inappropriate to remove any clothing from a child, and it is not the teacher's responsibility to contact parents or investigate suspicions of child abuse. This teacher's meeting with the father did not excuse her from the mandatory reporting laws of her state and from reporting it to her principal (or other authority designated by the school's policy). If the child had been the victim of abuse, the teacher would have been liable for criminal charges. A few states, such as Colorado, have exceptions to investigating requirements based on cultural practices, but it is still the designated person's responsibility to make the report.

To ensure that a child's disclosure will be handled correctly, teachers should practice their response using a mirror or friend. Research indicated that a child's recovery from abuse is strongly influenced by the reaction of the adults they tell and from whom they seek help and understanding.

Pay close attention to your body language and mannerisms. You may be the only person this child feels comfortable telling about the situation, so you don't want to discourage her or to make her feel that you're not available to listen.

If a child does make a disclosure, don't try to get all the details. Listen attentively and ask her if she wants to say anything else. If she chooses to say nothing more, then proceed to notify the principal as soon as possible and follow the steps outlined by your school's policy. Also, write down the actual words used in the disclosure and your interaction with the child. The first statement made spontaneously has forensic significance to the investigators and the exact words can be important.

Teachers have awesome responsibilities and insight into children's lives during school hours and extracurricular activities. It is not necessary to take great measures to look for child abuse, but we are ethically and legally accountable to know what is expected of us when we notice obvious signs of abuse.

[Sandra Connaway taught 10 years in public school systems and co-presented a workshop for educators at the Twelfth National Symposium on Child Sexual Abuse.]

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