

A School Counselor's Guide to Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect

April Sikes

Old Dominion University

Abstract

The process of reporting abuse can be challenging, traumatic, and at times, overwhelming. In order for school counselors to be effective helpers for children, it is essential that they know how to recognize and prevent child abuse and neglect. The purpose of this article is to provide professional school counselors with information they can use to assist in the identification, reporting, and prevention of child abuse and neglect.

A School Counselor's Guide to Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect

Based on statistics gathered through National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) of the Children's Bureau, for Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2005, an estimated 899,000 children in the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the 50 States were determined to be victims of neglect and abuse (U.S. Department of Health of Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2007). Currently, professionals including counselors, teachers, physicians, and mental health providers are required to report cases of suspected child abuse and neglect (Yell, 1996).

Since 2001, there has been an increase in the number of children who received an investigation, from an estimated 3,136,000 in 2001 to an estimation of 3,598,000 in 2005. Of those children that received an investigation, approximately one-quarter were determined to have been neglected or abused. According to national reports, 62.8% of children experienced neglect, 16.6% were physically abused, 9.3% were sexually abused, and 7.1% were emotionally maltreated during FFY 2005. A nationally estimated 1,460 children died of neglect or abuse—a rate of 1.96 children per 100,000 in the national population for FFY 2005 (U.S. Department of Health of Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2007).

For FFY 2005, 50.7% of child abuse victims were girls and 47.3% of victims were boys. Out of the age groups, the youngest children had the highest victimization (U.S. Department of Health of Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2007). From birth to the age 3, the rate of victimization was higher than any other age group. NCANDS data for 2004 demonstrate that 45% of fatalities were for

children younger than age 1. Children younger than age 4 accounted for 81% of abuse-related fatalities (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2006).

A perpetrator of child maltreatment may be anyone from a mother, father, brother, uncle, aunt, neighbor, or stranger. He or she may choose to act alone or with another individual. For FFY 2005, mothers acting alone maltreated approximately 40% of child victims, fathers alone maltreated 18.3%, and both parents maltreated 17.3% of child victims. Child victims abused by perpetrators that were caregivers, but not the parents, accounted for 10.7% (U.S. Department of Health of Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2007). Given these alarming statistics, school counselors are constantly faced with the issue of child abuse and neglect.

Maltreated children may suffer psychological, emotional, or physical harm as a result of the abuse, with long and short-term consequences. Some of these consequences include decreased academic performance (Eckenrode, J., Laird, M., & Doris, J., 1993; English, 1988; Yanowitz, K. L., Monte, E., & Tribble, J. R., 2003) aggressive or violent behavior (Eckenrode et al., 1993; English, 1988), decreased self-esteem (Yanowitz et al., 2003), and mental health problems including depression, suicidality, eating disorders, sleep disruption, substance abuse, and sexual problems (Einbender & Friedrich, 1989; English, 1988).

School counselors are not only responsible for reporting suspected child abuse; they also provide counseling services to children and their parents or guardians, coordinate resources in the community, and design prevention programs (Kenny & McEachern, 2002). In order for school counselors to be effective helpers for children, it is essential that they know how to recognize and prevent child abuse and neglect. The

purpose of this article is to provide professional school counselors with information they can use to assist in the identification, reporting, and prevention of child abuse and neglect. This article will address the following topics: (a) recognizing the four main types of child abuse or maltreatment, (b) reporting child abuse and neglect, (c) the role of school counselors before and after making a suspected child abuse report, and (d) preventing child abuse.

Recognizing Child Abuse

Definitions of Child Maltreatment

In an effort to increase the identification, reporting, and prevention of child maltreatment, Congress passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974, Public Law 93-247 (English, 1998). The act established a definition that was to be used nationally and on a state level. In accordance with this law, states are required to take action in protecting children. Four recognized types of child maltreatment include physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse.

According to English (1998), the four types are defined as the following:

Physical abuse: An act of commission by a caregiver that results or is likely to result in physical harm, including death of a child. Examples of physical abuse acts include kicking, biting, shaking, stabbing, or punching of a child. Spanking a child is usually considered a disciplinary action, although it can be classified as abusive if the child is bruised or injured.

Sexual abuse: An act of commission, including intrusion or penetration, molestation with genital contact, or other forms of sexual acts in which children are used to provide sexual gratification for the perpetrator. This

type of abuse also includes acts such as sexual exploitation and child pornography.

Neglect: An act of omission by a parent or caregiver that involves refusal or delay in providing health care; failure to provide basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, affection, and attention; inadequate supervision; or abandonment. This failure to act holds true for both physical and emotional neglect.

Emotional abuse: An act of commission or omission that includes rejecting, isolating, terrorizing, ignoring, or corrupting a child. Examples of emotional abuse are confinement; verbal abuse; withholding sleep, food, or shelter; exposing a child to domestic violence; allowing a child to engage in substance abuse or criminal activity; refusing to provide psychological care; and other inattention that results in harm or potential harm to a child. An important component of emotional or psychological abuse is that it must be sustained and repetitive. (p. 41)

Although each state recognizes child abuse and neglect, the definitions may vary from state to state. Section 63.2 - 100 of the Code of Virginia defines an abused or neglected child as any child under 18 years of age whose parent, guardian, or other person responsible for the child's care:

(a) causes or threatens to cause a non-accidental physical or mental injury, (b) neglects or refuses to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, emotional nurturing, or health care, (c) abandons the child, (d) fails to provide adequate supervision, or (e) commits or allows to be committed any illegal sexual act upon

a child including incest, rape, fondling, indecent exposure, prostitution, or allows a child to be used in any sexually explicit visual material.

Behavioral and Physical Indicators

The United States Government Printing Office published a document presenting the physical and behavioral indicators of child abuse and neglect (Wilder, 1991).

Physical indicators of physical abuse included bruises and welts on the face, mouth, lips, back, buttocks, and thighs. The bruises may be clustered, reflecting the shape of an article used to inflict pain such as a belt strap, belt buckle, or electrical cord, and on several different areas of the body. It is not uncommon for bruises to appear after a holiday, weekend, or absence. According to The National Children's Advocacy Center (2007), physical indicators of physical abuse include "unexplained" bruises, burns, and fractures. Areas that are swollen or cut are also physical indicators of physical abuse.

Behavioral indicators of physical abuse include withdrawing from others, aggressive behaviors, wearing clothing that is inappropriate to weather and body size, complaining of discomfort or pain, arriving early to school and leaves late, and being cautious of adult interaction. Although the presence of these indicators may exist, it does not imply physical abuse. Children and adolescents, especially males, are playful and aggressive by nature. For many of them injuries, including cuts and bruises, are a common part of play.

Unlike physical abuse, sexual abuse is difficult to recognize. According to Cole (1995), symptoms are not as clear as with other forms of child abuse. The behaviors exhibited by a sexually abused child may be the same as behaviors exhibited by a sexually developing child. Physical indicators of sexual abuse include pregnancy,

difficulty sitting or walking, bleeding or bruises in the genital area, bloody, torn or stained undergarments, and itching, discomfort, or pain in the genital area (Wilder, 1991).

James and Burch (1999) classified emotional and behavioral symptoms as externalizing and internalizing. Children who have been sexually abused may also internalize their emotions, directing their feelings inward. Internalizing behaviors include anxiety, depression, poor school performance, and self-mutilation (James & Burch, 1999). Externalizing behavior consists of actions aimed at other individuals. The sexually abused child may display anger, aggression, and hyperactivity. These children intentionally attempt to produce harm to others.

Other behavioral warning signs include bedwetting, prostitution, running away from home, participating in sexual activity inappropriate to child's age, poor peer relationships, and an abundant understanding of sexual activity (Lambie, 2005).

One of the most prevalent types of abuse is neglect. According to Lambie (2005) physical indicators of neglect include abandonment by parents or guardians, consistent hunger, inappropriate clothing, and unattended medical needs. The behavioral indicators of neglect include stealing food, arriving early and leaving late to school, high level of fatigue, delinquency, and alcohol or drug abuse (Wilder, 1991).

The fourth type of abuse, emotional abuse, may involve calling the child names, putting the child down, or rejecting the child. According to The National Children's Advocacy Center (2007), possible physical indicators include speech disorders, ulcers, and delayed physical development. An emotionally abused child may exhibit extreme passivity and aggression, delinquent behavior, antisocial behavior, or sleep disorders.

Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect

As part of the NCAPT law, funds were provided to states that met its guidelines for reporting child abuse and neglect. This federal law required that educators report suspected child abuse and neglect based on reasonable suspicions rather than certainty (Yell, 1996). Thus, school counselors are mandated reporters. As mandated reporters, they and other school personnel are required by law to report suspected child abuse and neglect. According to Remley and Herlihy (2007), failure to report suspected child abuse may result in criminal and civil legal liability. All states except Maryland and Wyoming impose criminal liability for failure to report suspected child abuse and neglect (Small, Lyons, & Guy, 2002).

Although school personnel are state mandated to report suspected child abuse and neglect, educators have been found to be reluctant to report (Bryant & Milsom, 2005). Hermann (2002) found that determining whether to report suspected child abuse was the second most frequently reported legal issue encountered by school counselors. Further, child and sexual abuse cases are reported as the second highest incidence of court appearances for school counselors (Davis, 1995). With anxiety surrounding reporting seemingly to be salient for those in schools, it is necessary for professional school counselors to become familiar with the process of reporting.

Process of Reporting

If child abuse or neglect is suspected, a report needs to be made to a local social service agency. Usually the division of social service that most states refer to when making suspected child abuse and neglect reports is Child Protective Services (CPS). CPS should be notified as soon as abuse or neglect is suspected. An oral (i.e.,

telephone or in-person) report is required by most states within a “reasonable amount of time” to a child protection agency. A reasonable amount of time to file a report is defined as a period of time ranging from 24 hours to 72 hours (Lambie, 2005). Based on state statutes, school counselors may be designated to contact Child Protective Services (CPS) and report suspected child abuse cases (Remley & Fry, 1993).

When contacting CPS, a reporting form should be used to provide accurate and thorough information regarding the child. Sample items on this report include the name, gender, age, and address of the child, the name and address of the parent or guardian, the condition of the child, the name, age, and gender of other children living in the home, incident requiring report, and the name and contact information of the reporter. Wilder (1991) suggested providing facts such as (a) the age, name, and location of the victim’s siblings, (b) the location of the victim at the time of report, (c) the time students are released for the day, (d) the language used most in the home, (e) additional abuse reports made by the school, and (f) previous experience with the parents. Professional school counselors are encouraged to have as much information as possible when contacting CPS.

The person that contacts CPS and makes the report will not be identified. The information is kept confidential and is not disclosed to the perpetrator. After contacting CPS, school counselors should document the report to CPS and keep a copy of the child abuse and neglect form. Each school may have a different procedure when reporting child abuse and neglect. It is important for school counselors to know their state’s reporting statute as well as the school district’s policy.

School Counselor's Role

The American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) Position Statement: Child Abuse/Neglect Prevention (ASCA, 2003) is:

Professional school counselors are mandated reporters and need policies, referral procedures, and essential knowledge. It is a legal, moral, and ethical responsibility to report child abuse.

ASCA recognizes it is the absolute responsibility of professional school counselors to report suspected cases of child abuse/neglect to the proper authorities. Responsible action by the professional counselor can be achieved through the recognition and understanding of the problem, knowing the reporting procedures and participating in available child abuse information programs. Professional school counselors are instrumental in early detection of abuse. (p.1)

This statement indicates professional school counselors have a responsibility, ethically, morally, and legally, to report suspected cases of child abuse and neglect. The ability to recognize symptoms of child abuse, knowledge of reporting procedures, and participation in child abuse programs assist school counselors in early detection and prevention of abuse. Specifically, school counselors have a role in reporting and are also accountable before and after making a report of child abuse.

Before a Report

Before a report is made, school counselors play various roles. The school counselor serves as a counselor to the student population, including unknown victims of abuse and neglect. Students may be victims of abuse without school counselors and

other school personnel suspecting the abuse. Physical and behavioral indicators may or may not be present at a minimal level. School counselors will also serve as consultants with concerned parents, teachers, or other school personnel. They may seek the guidance of the school counselor to react to concerns that they may be feeling regarding possible abuse or neglect. School counselors that are unsure that child abuse has occurred may consult with colleagues, including other school counselors that serve as consultants (Remley & Fry, 1993).

If concerns of abuse or neglect are reported, a school counselor should speak with the child to gain a better understanding of the situation. When interviewing a child, it may be helpful to ask questions regarding what happened to the child or a time when something happened that made the child feel uncomfortable. Sample interview questions include asking if the child knows why you are meeting with him, why the child thinks you want to meet with him, if someone did something to him that he did not like, and what happened. (Harborview Center for Sexual Assault & Traumatic Stress and Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission, 2006). Other suggestions include noticing the body language of the child during the interview, allowing the child to tell his or her story about the event, expressing empathy, and using active listening skills (James & Burch, 1999). During the interview, the school counselor should not ask leading questions or help with details. This may lead to inaccurate information from the child. Examples of leading questions to avoid include "Did your dad do it?" or "You're scared to go home, right?" In order to help the child feel comfortable, it is important for the school counselor to validate the child for disclosing the abuse.

After a Report

Once school counselors determine possible abuse or neglect, they take on various roles including informants, counselors to the victim or perpetrator, employees, liaisons with others, court witnesses, and counselors to the family. As informants, school counselors must report suspected child abuse. A counseling relationship may be maintained between the child and school counselor after a report is made. In addition, the perpetrator may disclose the abuse to the school counselor. As employees, school counselors are required to follow school policy and procedure in their school systems in addition to state laws regarding child abuse reporting. If the school counselor filed the initial report, he or she will be required to cooperate with child protective service, law enforcement, and attorneys if charges are filed. If charges are filed, school counselors must serve as witnesses in legal proceedings. Although the school counselor is likely to assume the role of counselor to the victim, he or she may become involved with the family by providing training or serving as a liaison if the child is removed from the home (Remley & Fry, 1993).

After filing a report, school counselors may initialize individual or small group counseling sessions to support the victims of abuse or neglect. In working with sexually abused children, school counselors need to be aware of behaviors associated with sexual development and sexual abuse symptoms. As consultants, counselors, and coordinators, school counselors promote healthy sexual development (James & Burch, 1999). Cole (1995) presented ways school counselors may be helpful to sexually abused students. These included listening alertly, observing parents and students for patterns of behavior, learning information through publications, attending workshops,

conferences, and other presentations, and developing networking relationship for treatment referral.

Children's books that contain themes of physical and sexual abuse can be an effective intervention with victims of abuse. According to Smith-D'Arezzo and Thompson (2006), the reasons for utilizing literature with children included developing a better understanding of the dynamics of society and family, allowing children an opportunity to speak with an adult about the abuse, and gaining a better understanding of issues that other children face and the world we live in. Examples of books include *Something Happened and I'm Scared to Tell*, *What's Going to Happen*, and *When I Was Little Like You*.

Referring the students and their families for treatment outside of the school may be a necessary step in protecting and supporting students and their families. Ritchie and Partin (1994) surveyed 149 school counselors employed in Ohio regarding their referral practices. They found that child abuse was the number one reason for referrals in elementary schools and the third most frequent referred concern for middle school counselors.

Prevention and Intervention

School counselors have an important responsibility in preventing child abuse and neglect. Establishing a school wide prevention program may also be effective in the prevention of child abuse and neglect (James & Burch, 1999). In collaboration with teachers, principals, and community agencies, school counselors can better assist the most vulnerable students and those in need of assistance. Teachers and school counselors have the best opportunities for impacting the lives of neglected and abused

children, increasing students' knowledge of abuse (Ko & Cosden, 2001). By collaborating with teachers, school counselors can incorporate life skills training into the classroom guidance curriculum (Lambie, 2005). By working together, they implement classroom activities aimed at improving self-esteem and interpersonal skills (Barrett-Kruse, Martinez, & Carll, 1998).

In efforts to reduce the potential of abuse, school counselors can offer resources to assist families and parents. Information regarding prenatal care, discipline techniques, developmental needs of children, and stress management skills can be offered to reduce the anxiety of becoming a new parent. Parental support groups can be effective in providing support and information to strengthen parenting skills and the parent-child relationship (Lambie, 2005).

In-service training of school personnel may assist in the prevention process (James & Burch, 1999). School personnel should be familiar with the symptoms of physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse. Training opportunities include school-based workshops, online training, coursework, videos, and child abuse publications.

School counselors can also assist in the prevention of child abuse by (a) knowing child protective services workers in their area, (b) maintaining accurate school counseling records in a confidential file, (c) purchasing materials specific to child abuse to facilitate discussion of feelings and trauma, and (d) having available resources about testifying in court (James & Burch, 1999). Virginia Department of Social Services offers a statewide Child Protective Services (CPS) Hotline 24 hours a day, seven days a week to receive reports of child abuse and neglect. Anyone can make a report. School

counselors are not required to prove that abuse occurred, are not required to provide their name, do not need parental permission to make a report, and do not have to inform the parent of the report (Commonwealth of Virginia, Department of Social Services, Child Protective Services, 2007).

Conclusion

School counselors are required by law to report suspected child abuse and neglect. Ethically, they are bound to intervene and assist students, teachers, principals, families, and community members. In order to effectively intervene, school counselors must be aware of the occurrence and severity of child abuse and neglect. They must be able to identify symptoms of abuse, report suspected cases of abuse and neglect in a timely manner, and be familiar with child abuse prevention and intervention strategies.

Child abuse and neglect is real; is traumatic; and for thousands of children is a common part of their lives. By advocating for children of abuse through appropriate reporting, school counselors can lead the way to stop the cycle of child abuse.

References

- American School Counselor Association. (2003). *Position statement: Child abuse/neglect prevention: The professional school counselor and child abuse and neglect prevention*. Retrieved November 5, 2007, from <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=194>
- Barrett-Kruse, C., Martinez, E., & Carll, N. (1998). Beyond reporting suspected abuse: Positively influencing the development of the student within the classroom. *Professional School Counseling, 1*, 57-60.
- Bryant, J., & Milsom, A. (2005). Child abuse reporting by school counselors. *Professional School Counseling, 9*, 63-71.
- Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2006). *Child abuse and neglect fatalities: Statistics and interventions*. Retrieved October 21, 2007, from www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/fatality.cfm
- Cole, C. V. (1995). Sexual abuse of middle school students. *School Counselor, 42*, 239-245.
- Commonwealth of Virginia, Department of Social Services, Child Protective Services (2007). *A guide for mandated reporters in recognizing and reporting child abuse and neglect*. Retrieved March 11, 2008, from http://www.dss.virginia.gov/files/division/dfs/cps/mandated_reporter_information/mandatedreporterbooklet3-07.pdf
- Davis, T. (1995). Elementary and middle level counselors' courtroom hearing experiences. *NASSP Bulletin, 79*, 10-15.

- Eckenrode, J., Laird, M., & Doris, J. (1993). School performance and disciplinary problems among abused and neglected children. *Developmental Psychology, 29*, 53-62.
- Einbender, A. J., & Friedrich, W. N. (1989). Psychological functioning and behavior of sexually abused girls. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 57*, 155-157.
- English, D. J. (1998). The extent and consequences of child maltreatment. *Future of Children, 8*, 39-53.
- Harborview Center for Sexual Assault & Traumatic Stress and Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission (2006). *Child interview guide*. Retrieved March 11, 2008, from <http://depts.washington.edu/hcsats/pdf/guidelines/Child%20Interv%20Guide%20Aug%202006.pdf>
- Hermann, M. A. (2002). A study of legal issues encountered by school counselors and perceptions of their preparedness to respond to legal challenges. *Professional School Counseling, 6*, 12-19.
- James, S. H., & Burch, K. (1999). School counselors' roles in cases of child sexual behavior. *Professional School Counseling, 2*, 211-217.
- Kenny, M., & McEachern, A. (2002). Reporting suspected child abuse: A pilot comparison of middle and high school counselors and principals. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 11*, 59-75.
- Ko, S. F., & Cosden, M. A. (2001). Do elementary school-based child abuse prevention programs work? A high school follow-up. *Psychology in the Schools, 38*, 57-66.

- Lambie, G. W. (2005). Child Abuse and Neglect: A practical guide for professional school counselors. *Professional School Counseling, 8*, 249-258.
- National Children's Advocacy Center. (n.d.). *Physical and behavioral indicators of abuse*. Retrieved November 4, 2007, from http://www.nationalcac.org/families/for_workers/abuse_indicators.html
- Remley, T. P., Jr., & Fry, L. J. (1993). Reporting suspected child abuse: Conflicting roles for the counselor. *School Counselor, 40*, 253-159.
- Remley, T.P., Jr. & Herlihy, B. (2007). *Ethical, legal, and professional issues in counseling* (updated 2nd ed.). Columbus, Ohio: Prentice Hall.
- Ritchie, M. H., & Partin, R. L. (1994). Referral practices of school counselors. *School Counselor, 41*, 263-272.
- Small, M. A., Lyons, P. M., Jr., & Guy, L. S. (2002). Liability issues in child abuse and neglect reporting statutes. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 33*, 13-18.
- Smith-D'Arezzo, W. M., & Thompson, S. (2006). Topics of stress and abuse in picture books for children. *Children's Literature in Education, 37*, 335-347.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families. (2007). *Child Maltreatment 2005*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Virginia General Assembly (n.d.). *Definitions of child abuse*. Retrieved March 2, 2008, from <http://leg1.state.va.us/cgi-bin/legp504.exe?000+cod+63.2-100>
- Wilder, P. (1991). A counselor's contribution to the child abuse referral network. *School Counselor, 38*, 203-213.

Yanowitz, K. L., Monte, E., & Tribble, J. R. (2003). Teachers' beliefs about the effects of child Abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect: The International Journal*, 27, 483-488.

Yell, M. (1996). Reporting child abuse and neglect: Legal requirements. *Preventing School Failure*, 4, 161-163.

Author Note

April Sikes, M.Ed., LPC, NCC is a doctoral candidate in the Ph.D. program in Counseling at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. She is a licensed professional school counselor, licensed professional counselor, and national certified counselor. She has served as a school counselor in elementary and middle school settings, investigated reports of child abuse and neglect as a case manager, and provided therapeutic and clinical services for families of abused children. She has presented and co-presented on a variety of subjects, including play therapy in elementary and middle school settings, school counselors and the use of children's literature, child abuse and neglect, and ethical and legal issues in school counseling.