



Child Abuse and Neglect:

Knowing When to Intervene

by Susan Pass

Three simple decision-making charts can help teachers assess when intervention is appropriate and legally required.

Did you ever suspect that a student in your classroom had been the victim of child abuse or neglect? When that happened, did you know what to do about it? Did you decide just to “let it go” because you were not sure whether you had a real case? Did you decide to “wait and see” because you were afraid of a lawsuit from the parents? If you reported the case to your school administrator, was the administrator hesitant to take action? In these days of lawsuits falling on school districts like snowflakes, we all hesitate. We fear the consequences of making a false accusation.

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If the abuse of a child were at the hands of a schoolyard bully or lurking pedophile, parents most likely would applaud intervention. However, precisely because most cases involve an abusive parent, intervention is almost automatically deemed a dicey proposition. The law, however, now requires teachers to report cases of suspected child abuse or neglect. Failure to report raises issues of criminal and civil liability.

An estimated 896,000 children across the country were victims of abuse or neglect in 2002 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2004). That is almost 1 in every 100 Americans, with an obviously higher classroom incidence when reduced to the K–12 age group. The math implies that you already have several abused students in your school, and maybe they were, are, or will be in your classroom. You or a coworker should know when and how to intervene.

This article offers three simple decision graphics that clarify when a teacher's intervention is appropriate and necessary.

Dimensions of the Problem

Research shows that the child abuse and neglect problem in this country not only has physical, emotional, and psychological dimensions, but also serious educational impacts. Some of the research findings are enlightening:

- Cases of child abuse and neglect have been increasing nationwide (Howe 2005; Pass 1986).
- The trauma of abuse or neglect of a child often lingers with that victim into adulthood and even can influence the raising of that victim's own children (Anda et al. 2005).
- Abused children can become child abusers themselves (Anda et al. 2005).
- Chronic malnutrition and abusive child behavior adversely affect the child's social and emotional functioning in school, starting in preschool (Barrett, Radke-Yarrow, and Kline 1982; Anda et al. 2005).

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- Most often, the abuser or neglector is someone known by the child (i.e., a relative or neighbor), and the problem usually happens in the child's home or child-care center (Administration for Children and Families 2004).
- To prevent child abuse from happening, many suggest that the first line of defense should be the school teacher (Haeseler 2006).
- Unfortunately, because of the reluctance of edu-

cators (Pass 1986) to report possible cases, deaths have been increasing at an alarming rate (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2004).

- In 2003, the total costs of child abuse and neglect were estimated at more than \$94 million. These costs included demands on the health care, mental health care, law enforcement, child welfare, and judicial systems. Additionally, indirect costs included special education, juvenile delinquency programs, and adult criminality (Goldman et al. 2003).

Knowing these facts, schools are concerned with creating protocols to enable educators to address issues of abuse and neglect more efficiently (Crosson-Tower 2002).

Educators on the Front Line

In 1974, Congress passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), which sets some minimum standards pertinent to the reporting of child abuse and neglect. CAPTA was amended and reauthorized several times, most recently in 2003. To qualify for funding under the Act, all 50 states enacted laws to promote the prevention of child abuse. Under many of these laws, the failure of a teacher to report a suspected incident could lead to the teacher's dismissal and revocation of his or her teaching license. Generally, however, the laws protect teachers and administrators when they report in good faith (Smith 2006).

While overwhelming similarity exists in the statutes from state to state, there are still many differences. Some of these are small, but substantial; others are more nuanced, but potentially significant (Crosson-Tower 2002). For example:

- One state may require "school officials" to report, but not specify teachers, as might be the case in the law of another state. A number of states identify no particular person or category of persons as a "mandated reporter," but require "any person" to report.
- "Some statutes call for reporting upon a mere 'reasonable cause to believe' or a 'reasonable suspicion.' Other statutes require the reporter to 'know or suspect,' which is a higher degree of knowledge" (Smith 2006, 1).
- Liability may be civil, criminal, or both, depending on the state.

Most healthcare attorneys will advise a client that "it is far better, in theory, to be faced with defending

a civil action for reporting suspected abuse rather than the bleak alternative of defending a civil action . . . if a child is injured or killed as a result of failing to make a report of suspected child abuse" (Cox and Osowiecki 1998). To prevent unnecessary reporting of child abuse, social service, medical, and educational agencies provide teachers and administrators with information about identifying and reporting abuse. Reports and guidelines to help teachers, however, often are written in narrative form and are not easily accessible to busy educators.

Educators are not *per se* lawyers or police officers. Teachers are not likely to know whether a situation represents a *bona fide* case of abuse or neglect that needs to be addressed. What is needed, in this writer's opinion, is an easy-to-read, at-a-glance, quick reference document that identifies the symptoms of abuse and neglect, and indicates appropriate responses.

A Broken Arm and No 'Good Bye'

Early in my teaching career, I had a very bright sixth-grade student who started to make failing grades. Even though he was well-liked by the other students, he increasingly appeared apprehensive in class. I was concerned and asked him whether he could bring in his mother for a conference at school. He said that his mother had remarried and did not have the time.

Two weeks later, the same child arrived with a black eye. I asked what happened, and he replied that he had fallen off a bike. I then phoned the mother to arrange a conference. When the mother arrived at school, she was nervous and asked what the child had said. When told that he said he had fallen off a bike, she confirmed his answer. I told her that I planned to call the local child protective services agency if the child had another incident.

I then reported on the meeting to the principal. The principal informed me that I should have notified him immediately when the child had arrived at school with a black eye. Three weeks later, the same child came to school with a broken arm. I immediately went to the principal, who called the local child protective services agency. That agency sent a caseworker to the home later the same afternoon. The family, including the child, had moved away without a forwarding address. I never saw that child again.

Had I known what to do and when to act, had I had a simple set of guidelines earlier, the outcome might have been quite different. That incident is what led to the research and work to produce the decision graphics included with this article. With little more

than a glance at the charts, I would have been on the right path.

A Teacher-Friendly Solution

The decision-making charts developed by this author (see figures 1, 2, and 3) provide matrices that identify

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what type of action is needed in a given situation. After observing symptoms of possible abuse or neglect, and then consulting the charts, an educator can assess at-a-glance which of three actions is required:

- When only behavioral symptoms are observed, file notes about the observations for future reference.
- When only physical symptoms are observed, immediately consult with the child as well as the parent or guardian. Also consult the school nurse, principal, and school counselor, as appropriate. After consultation, if possible abuse was indicated, call the local child protective services agency.
- When a child displays a combination of physical and behavioral symptoms, an educator has a legal obligation to inform the local child protective services agency about a possible case of child abuse or neglect.

Using the Charts

The charts shown in figures 1, 2, and 3 describe behavioral symptoms in the yellow, vertical bars. Physical symptoms are described in the blue, horizontal bars. To use the charts, an educator needs to find the ob-

served symptom or symptoms the child is displaying on any one of the three charts.

Figure 1. Physical Abuse

Directions

| | | | | |
|--|-----------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| File notes for future reference. | | | | |
| Consult with child, parent or guardian, school nurse, principal, and school counselor, as appropriate. After consultation, if possible abuse was indicated, call local child protective services agency. | | | | |
| When a physical symptom intersects with a behavioral symptom, call local child protective services agency. | | | | |
| | Wary of adult contact | Apprehensive when other kids cry | Behavioral extremes | Frightened of parents |
| Internal injuries | | | | |
| Bruises/Welts | | | | |
| Dry burns/Rope burns | | | | |
| Round burns/Immersion burns | | | | |
| Fractures | | | | |
| Difficulty in walking/sitting | | | | |

Some observations are of suspicious behaviors or dispositions and, therefore, rely on the qualitative assessment or judgment of the teacher. These, by themselves, do not indicate abuse, but it would be prudent to note them for future reference, when other symptoms might be observed. They are shown in the yellow vertical bars.

Observations of physical appearance or conditions are more concrete and less judgmental. If these were the result of abuse, they would fall in the realm of direct evidence. These are shown on the blue horizontal bars. When observed, the teacher needs to ask the child and the child's parent or guardian what happened. In addition, a good practice is for the teacher to notify the school nurse, principal, and school counselor, as appropriate.

However, if the teacher observes a combination of a yellow, vertical bar symptom and also a blue, horizontal bar symptom (in other words, they intersect in one of the green boxes), the teacher immediately must notify the local governmental agency respon-

sible for child protection. Authorities in the field of child abuse and neglect have verified that with such a combination—one symptom from a vertical bar and one from a horizontal bar—the case needs to be investigated by the local child protective services agency. The phone number of the local agency, which varies by state and location, is available in the governmental pages of all local phone books. Most states provide a toll-free hotline.

Figure 2. Sexual Abuse

Directions

| | | | | | | |
|--|----------------------|------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| File notes for future reference. | | | | | | |
| Consult with child, parent or guardian, school nurse, principal, and school counselor, as appropriate. After consultation, if possible abuse was indicated, call local child protective services agency. | | | | | | |
| When a physical symptom intersects with a behavioral symptom, call local child protective services agency. | | | | | | |
| | Won't change clothes | Withdrawal | Fantasizes with infantile behavior | Poor peer relations | Bizarre or unusual sexual behavior | Itching in genital area |
| Difficulty walking/sitting | | | | | | |
| Torn/bloody underclothing | | | | | | |
| Venereal diseases | | | | | | |
| Delinquent/Truant/Runaway | | | | | | |
| Pregnancy | | | | | | |
| Bleeding/Bruises in genital area | | | | | | |

How to Report

Cox and Osowiecki (1998), both attorneys specializing in such cases, wrote that some state statutes will specify the type of information to submit in a report of suspected child maltreatment cases. This information generally includes:

- child's name, age, gender, and address;
- parent or guardian's name and address;
- nature and extent of the injury or condition observed;
- prior injuries and when observed;
- actions taken by the reporter (e.g., talking to the child);
- where the act allegedly occurred; and

- reporter's name, location, and contact information (sometimes not required, but extremely valuable to child protective services staff), and this information is usually kept confidential.

Figure 3. Neglect

Directions

| | | | | | |
|--|------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| File notes for future reference. | | | | | |
| Consult with child, parent or guardian, school nurse, principal, and school counselor, as appropriate. After consultation, if possible neglect was indicated, call local child protective services agency. | | | | | |
| When a physical symptom intersects with a behavioral symptom, call local child protective services agency. | | | | | |
| | Begging for or stealing food | Constant fatigue | Drug or alcohol abuse | Falling asleep in class/Listless | Voluntary extended stays at school |
| Abandonment | | | | | |
| Consistent lack of supervision | | | | | |
| Consistent hunger | | | | | |
| Delinquent/Truant/Runaway | | | | | |
| Inappropriate dress | | | | | |
| Poor hygiene | | | | | |
| Unattended medical or physical needs | | | | | |

Development and Procedures

The decision-making charts provided here were judged valid by 126 administrators, teachers, counselors, police officers, and social workers. In addition, both the Illinois State Department of Child Services and the Texas State Department of Child Protective Services have affirmed that the charts are both useful and valid.

Development of this decision-making and reporting system took nearly two years. Over that period of time, 12 different versions were tested, which eventually were refined into three basic charts: one on child physical abuse, one on child sexual abuse, and one on child neglect.

The first level of development consisted of interviews with noted authorities in the field of child abuse and neglect in the author's state. These authorities were selected by the author based on the recommendations by personnel in the local child protective services agency. From those interviews, the first charts were developed. Using a

Delphi technique (where experts discuss the product and refine it until they can endorse validity), revisions were made to all three charts. Most of the work and refinement of the instruments was conducted during face-to-face interviews, which were supplemented by some mailings and phone interviews.

For the second level of development, the charts were presented to public school teachers and administrators (n=71) in the author's school district during three in-services (for elementary, middle, and high school teachers). Comments were noted as these educators critiqued the charts. The original panel of experts—those who were interviewed initially—read these critiques and further revised each chart.

During the third and final level of development, other professionals (n=96) in the state—including school medical personnel, social workers, school counselors, and reporting-agency administrators—were consulted about the revised charts. These experts were selected by nomination of those who earlier critiqued the charts (during level one) and also the education professors at the local university. Members of this group of state professionals who participated in the third level of development were sent opinion surveys regarding the three charts. The survey results (see table 1) confirmed that the charts adequately reflected what to do when observing specific symptoms of possible abuse or neglect of children. On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being the most effective, and 1 being the least), this sampling of professionals assigned the instruments high ratings.

Table 1. Survey Results

| Instrument | N | Mean |
|----------------|----|------|
| Physical Abuse | 96 | 4.63 |
| Sexual Abuse | 96 | 4.57 |
| Neglect | 95 | 4.58 |

Because of confidentiality imposed by both the local child protective services agency and the court system, no data are obtainable on how the use of these charts resulted in convictions in child abuse and neglect cases. Unofficially, however, caseworkers in the field of child protection stated that the charts proved themselves very useful.

Conclusions

Teachers and administrators can use these three charts to identify incidences of possible child abuse and neglect among their students without fear of retribution. At a glance, educators can determine what action is appropriate based on the symptoms they observe. The charts make

Key Terms

Abandonment. Parents or guardians have left the child completely alone for too long a period of time. The severity of child abuse or neglect decreases as the child gets older. For example, leaving a 19-year-old alone for most of the day is not a case of neglect or abuse. Leaving a four-year-old alone for an hour is a case of neglect or abuse.

Behavioral Extremes. A child is obstinate or disruptive in class, but normally not so. Behaviors include acting out aggressive or sexual acts.

Consistent Lack of Supervision. Parents or guardians are at home, but do not concern themselves with what the child is doing or where the child is.

Fantasizes with Infantile Behavior. A child retrogresses and withdraws into his or her own imaginary world—introversion with retrogression.

Immersion Burns. These can be of three types:

- *Sock-like*, when a child has been made to stand in too hot or harmful liquid (such as bleach).
- *Glove-like*, when a child's hand has been inserted into too hot or harmful liquid.
- *Blotch*, when a harmful or hot liquid has been splashed on a child.

Inappropriate Dress. Clothing is inadequate for the climate or not up to school codes. The same outfit may be worn for weeks on end.

Neglect. Necessary requirements for a child's health and well-being are not being met (such as insufficient food). However, if the situation is legitimately due to a family's lack of income, it is not a case of child abuse or neglect. Look at intent.

Poor Hygiene. Lack of cleanliness can be a learned trait. It is not a case of abuse or neglect if the parents have not taught cleanliness.

Truancy. In most American states, 10 unexcused absences out of 40 consecutive school days.

Withdrawal. Children sometimes want to be left to themselves, but teachers need to be concerned when this reaches an extreme. Abused or neglected children often are very shy, introverted, or timid, and will isolate themselves from peers most of the time.

what could be a complicated decision-making process very simple.

Educators will find the charts, if used correctly, to be useful tools for fulfilling their legal obligations under state and local laws for mandated reporters, under which all cases of suspected child abuse and neglect must be reported to the local governmental child protection agency. The author hopes that use of these charts will serve to protect children and, perhaps, to reduce the incidences of child abuse and neglect in America. To read your state's statutes concerning reporting possible cases of child abuse and neglect, go to the Child Welfare Information Gateway's Web site at www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies. The reader is invited to replicate this work. ■

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