

The Role of Educators in Preventing and Responding to Child Abuse and Neglect



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau
Office on Child Abuse and Neglect

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Table of Contents

PREFACE	1
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	3
1. PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW	7
Guiding Principles.....	7
Child Abuse and Neglect Statistics	8
The Role of Educators.....	8
2. IDENTIFYING REASONS WHY EDUCATORS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT	9
Community Efforts.....	10
Educational Opportunities	10
Legal Concerns	10
Professional Responsibilities	11
Personal Commitments	12
3. RECOGNIZING CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT	13
Physical Abuse.....	14
Neglect	16
Emotional Maltreatment	18
Sexual Abuse	19
General Indicators of Abuse and Neglect.....	22
Conversations with Families and Children	24
Child Abuse within the School	27
4. REPORTING CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT	29
Federal Legislation.....	29
State Law.....	30
Local Policies and Procedures Regarding Reporting.....	32

Difficulties That May Be Encountered When Reporting.....	34
Once the Report Is Made	36
5. PROVIDING SUPPORT AFTER THE REPORT:	
WHAT SCHOOLS CAN OFFER	39
Sharing Relevant Information	39
Support for the Child, the Parents, and the Family	39
Child Abuse and Neglect Multidisciplinary Teams	43
Community Coordination	44
6. PREVENTING CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT	45
School-based Programs for Children and Adolescents	45
School-based Programs for Families.....	50
School-Community Programs	51
Individual Action	52
Conclusion	53
ENDNOTES.....	55
APPENDICES:	
APPENDIX A—GLOSSARY OF TERMS	59
APPENDIX B—RESOURCE LISTINGS OF SELECTED NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS CONCERNED WITH CHILD MALTREATMENT.....	65
APPENDIX C—STATE TOLL-FREE TELEPHONE NUMBERS FOR REPORTING CHILD ABUSE	71
APPENDIX D—EDUCATORS’ CHECKLIST FOR RECOGNIZING POSSIBLE CHILD MALTREATMENT	73
APPENDIX E—SAMPLE LIST OF CONTACTS FOR REPORTING SUSPECTED CASES OF CHILD ABUSE OR NEGLECT	77
APPENDIX F—SAMPLE REPORT OF SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT	79

Preface

Each day, the safety and well-being of some children across the Nation are threatened by child abuse and neglect. Intervening effectively in the lives of these children and their families is not the sole responsibility of any single agency or professional group, but rather is a shared community concern.

The *Child Abuse and Neglect User Manual Series* has provided guidance on child protection to hundreds of thousands of multidisciplinary professionals and concerned community members since the late 1970s. The *User Manual Series* provides a foundation for understanding child maltreatment and the roles and responsibilities of various practitioners in its prevention, identification, investigation, assessment, and treatment. Through the years, the manuals have served as valuable resources for building knowledge, promoting effective practices, and enhancing community collaboration.

Since the last update of the *User Manual Series* in the early 1990s, a number of changes have occurred that dramatically affect each community's response to child maltreatment. The changing landscape reflects increased recognition of the complexity of issues facing parents and their children, new legislation, practice innovations, and system reform efforts. Significant advances in research have helped shape new directions for interventions, while ongoing evaluations help us to know "what works."

The Office on Child Abuse and Neglect (OCAN) within the Children's Bureau of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), has developed this third edition of the *User Manual Series* to reflect the increased knowledge base and the evolving state of practice. The updated and new manuals are comprehensive in scope while also succinct in presentation. They are easy to follow and address trends and concerns relevant to today's professional.

This manual, *The Role of Educators in Preventing and Responding to Child Abuse and Neglect*, builds upon *A Coordinated Response to Child Abuse and Neglect: The Foundation for Practice*, the keystone publication of the *User Manual Series*. It provides the basis for the involvement of educators in combating the problem of child abuse and neglect. It also may be used by other professionals involved in child abuse and neglect interventions, such as child protective services, mental health, law enforcement, health care, and early childhood professionals, to gain a better understanding of the role of educators in child protection.

User Manual Series

This manual—along with the entire *Child Abuse and Neglect User Manual Series*—is available from the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information. Contact the Clearinghouse for a full list of available manuals and ordering information:

National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information
330 C Street, SW
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Phone: (800) FYI-3366 or (703) 385-7565
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The manuals also are available online at <http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/profess/tools/usermanual.cfm>.

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Dr. Crosson-Tower is the author of numerous publications, including: *Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect*, *Exploring Child Welfare: A Practice Perspective*, *When Children Are Abused: An Educator's Guide to Intervention*, *Secret Scars: A Guide for Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, *Homeless Students* and *How Schools Can Combat Child Abuse and Neglect*. In addition, she has authored a monograph, *Designing and Implementing a School Reporting Protocol: A How-to Manual for Massachusetts Teachers*, for the Children's Trust Fund in Boston, and is currently working on a child sexual abuse text and a handbook for clergy to aid them in responding to abuse.

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CHAPTER 1

Purpose and Overview

This chapter provides a very brief overview of child abuse and neglect and the role of educators in preventing and responding to maltreated children. The reader is referred to the first manual in this series, *A Coordinated Response to Child Abuse and Neglect: The Foundation for Practice*, for an indepth description of the various types of child abuse and neglect.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Parents have a fundamental right to raise their children as they see fit, and society presumes that parents will act in their children's best interest. When parents do not protect their children from harm or meet their basic needs—as with cases of child abuse and neglect—society has a responsibility to intervene to protect the health and welfare of these children. Any intervention into family life on behalf of children must be guided by Federal and State laws, sound professional standards for practice, and strong philosophical underpinnings.

The key principles guiding child protection are largely based on Federal statutes, primarily delineated in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) and the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). CAPTA, in its original inception, was signed into law in 1974 (P.L. 93-247) and is reauthorized by Congress every 5 years. CAPTA was reauthorized on June 25, 2003, as part

of the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-36). ASFA was signed into law in 1997 (P.L. 105-89) and built upon earlier laws and reforms to promote the safety and well-being of maltreated children. These laws and other guiding legislation are referenced throughout this publication and are specifically discussed in “Federal Legislation and Programs” in Chapter 8 of *A Coordinated Response to Child Abuse and Neglect: The Foundation for Practice*. ASFA promotes three national goals for child protection:

- **Safety.** All children have the right to live in an environment free from abuse and neglect. The safety of children is the paramount concern that must guide child protection efforts.
- **Permanency.** Children need a family and a permanent place to call home. A sense of continuity and connectedness is central to a child's healthy development.
- **Child and family well-being.** Children deserve nurturing families and environments in which their physical, emotional, educational, and social needs are met. Child protection practices must take into account each child's needs and should promote the healthy development of family relationships.

In addition, ASFA underscores the importance of the accountability of service delivery systems in achieving positive outcomes for children related to each of these goals.

CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT STATISTICS

To help illustrate the importance of preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect, it may be useful to examine the scope of its occurrence. The following findings describe reported child victimization rates by major types of maltreatment as stated in the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) for 2001:

- **Neglect.** More than one-half of all reported victims (59.2 percent) suffered neglect (including medical neglect), an estimated rate of 7 per 1,000 children.
- **Physical abuse.** Approximately one-fifth of all known victims (18.6 percent) were physically abused, an estimated rate of 2 per 1,000 children.
- **Sexual abuse.** Of all reported child maltreatment cases, almost one-tenth (9.6 percent) had been sexually abused, an estimated rate of 1 per 1,000 children.
- **Psychological maltreatment.** Less than one-tenth (6.8 percent) were identified as victims of psychological maltreatment, or less than 1 per 1,000 children.¹

(Note: Some children are reported as victims of more than one type of maltreatment.)

THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS

Children and adolescents spend a large portion of their time in school, which gives educators more access to students than most other professionals. For the purpose of this manual, the term “educator” is meant to encompass not only the classroom teacher, but also other school personnel involved in serving the child. This manual is designed to examine the roles that teachers, school counselors, school social

workers, school nurses, special education professionals, administrators, and other school personnel have in helping maltreated children.

The Role of Educators in Preventing and Responding to Child Abuse and Neglect is intended to expand the information provided in *A Coordinated Response to Child Abuse and Neglect: The Foundation for Practice* by addressing issues unique to education professionals. Specifically, this manual will address the following topics:

- Identifying reasons why educators are concerned;
- Recognizing child abuse and neglect;
- Reporting child abuse and neglect;
- Providing support after the report—what schools can offer;
- Preventing child abuse and neglect.

Appendices providing sample instruments and other information also are included.

Using this manual, the educator can contribute to the increased well-being of children in a variety of ways. Certainly, the first area of defense against the problem of child maltreatment is one of awareness. Each individual who is involved with children has the obligation of knowing the basics of how to protect children from harm. The protection of children is not only an individual issue, but a community concern as well. Educators are an integral part of the community and, as such, can lead and be involved in community efforts to combat child maltreatment.

CHAPTER 2

Identifying Reasons Why Educators Are Concerned About Child Abuse and Neglect

The educator has a vital role in identifying, reporting, and preventing child abuse and neglect. Over the last few decades, various organizations have developed programs directed at informing educators that they are a valuable resource. Professionals submitted more than one-half (56.5 percent) of the cases referred to and assessed or investigated by child protective services (CPS), with education personnel the most frequent source of reports (16.2 percent).² This highlights the important role of educators and indicates that many educators are already involved in responding to this issue, yet more can be done to address maltreatment. Several studies indicate that many educators are not entirely clear what the indicators of child abuse and neglect are or how to report suspected maltreatment.³ One study surveyed 2,793 schools to assess staff readiness to report maltreatment. Because only 51 percent of those completing the questionnaire had received training on reporting child maltreatment, there is still much work to be done to alert educators to their important role in identifying and reporting abuse and neglect.⁴

There are many reasons why educators are so vital in identifying, treating, and preventing child maltreatment. First, they have close and consistent contact with children. Second, educators have a professional and legally mandated responsibility for

reporting suspected maltreatment. While educators facilitate children's learning, children cannot learn effectively if their attention or energy is sapped by the conflicts inherent in being maltreated. Third, school personnel have a unique opportunity to advocate for children, as well as provide programs and services that can help children and strengthen families. It is important to realize that a positive relationship with a supporting adult may enhance the resiliency of children who have been abused, are at-risk for being abused, or live in a home where no maltreatment occurs but the family experiences other problems, such as substance abuse.

This chapter discusses a variety of reasons why educators must become involved in preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect. These reasons are related to:

- Community efforts
- Educational opportunities
- Legal concerns
- Professional responsibilities
- Personal commitments

COMMUNITY EFFORTS

Dealing with child abuse and neglect is, in fact, a community effort. As leaders in their communities, educators are often in an ideal position to initiate this type of teamwork. A variety of formal programs involving the schools and the community have been especially effective in addressing the difficult and self-destructive behavior in youth that often is an aftereffect of child abuse.

Model programs use community resources to promote the concepts of cooperation, peer mediation, independence, and acceptance of the common good.⁵ A good example of one such community effort took place in a small city and resulted in the conviction for sexual abuse of a popular clergyman who had been involved with a local Boy Scout troop. Once the initial shock had subsided, the church members joined with local school officials and other citizens to address the concerns of the community's children and their parents. Support groups for both the abused boys and the nonabused boys who knew the perpetrator, as well as awareness and educational programs, helped the stunned community recover.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

The primary goal of the education system is to teach. In order to achieve this, it is sometimes necessary to remove barriers that impede a child's ability to learn. Every year, millions of dollars are authorized through various legislative acts for this purpose, including the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (P.L. 107-110), the recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142), which is now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA (P.L. 101-476). These laws protect the right of every child to an education and attest to the Nation's commitment to remove barriers to each child's ability to learn. The trauma and residual effects of child abuse and neglect are barriers

to learning as much as any type of academic or physical impediment that schools spend so much time addressing.⁶

Educators are trained to recognize and intervene when children are not able to benefit fully from their educational opportunities. This training makes them uniquely qualified to detect indicators that may signify that a child is being maltreated. Since schools are one of the few places in which children are seen almost daily, educators have a chance to see changes in appearance and behavior. From classroom teachers to guidance counselors, as well as social workers, nurses, psychologists, and administrators—everyone becomes an integral part of the educational team to help children.

To learn more about legislation related to education issues, visit <http://www.ed.gov/index.jsp>.

LEGAL CONCERNS

Every State legally mandates that educators report suspected child abuse and neglect. A mandated reporter is anyone required by State law to report maltreatment to the designated State agency. However, some States clearly define that teachers, principals, nurses, and counselors are included in this mandate, while other States designate all school personnel. In addition, almost every State levies a penalty against mandated reporters who choose not to report. This penalty ranges from a fine, a misdemeanor charge, or time spent in jail. Until recently, most States did not strictly enforce these penalties, but this has changed within the last few years. A number of States have sanctioned nonreporters for failing to obey reporting laws, so it is important that educators know the reporting laws for their State.

In addition to penalties for not reporting abuse and neglect, all States provide immunity from civil liability and criminal penalty for mandated reporters who report in good faith. In other words, the law

requires educators to report child abuse and neglect, provides protection for those educators who become involved, and penalizes those who fail to meet their obligations.

PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Educators have a keen sense of their professional responsibility to the children in their care. They are concerned about the health, safety, and happiness of these children. Educators are aware that they are role models for the children they teach and that they may be an important source of support, concern, and care for many children. Educators want to do what is best for the children in their care because their professional standards require it. As mandated reporters, all educators have the responsibility not only to report suspected abuse, but also to know how to make a report, to be familiar with their district's policies and reporting procedures, and to communicate with CPS.

Additionally, as adults in constant contact with children, educators must be aware of issues surrounding physical contact with a child—what is considered appropriate versus inappropriate in everyday classroom activities—as well as the issue of corporal punishment.

Many daycare centers and schools are requesting or even mandating that their staff not touch children because of fears that allegations of child abuse will be made against the educators. Nurturing touch, however, may enhance learning for some children. All children, and certainly those who are not nurtured at home, may be robbed of this important element.

Educators should not be afraid of “normal” touching, as it is another positive gesture or affirmation that they can give. It is important to realize, however, that what is considered “normal” varies between individuals and is affected by such factors as personal experience and cultural background. Touching is always a concern if it is done in secrecy or isolation from others or for the sexual gratification of the educator. Children need to

be informed and empowered about what is appropriate and inappropriate touching.⁷ Prevention programs are now designed to inform children about good, bad, and confusing touch. “Good touch” usually refers to hugs, encouraging pats, and other positive gestures. It is important to remember that people may interpret these gestures differently. For example, some people prefer not to be hugged; for them this is not “good touching.” “Bad touch” usually refers to hitting, punching, biting, and other acts that hurt. “Confusing touch” refers to contact that may not feel quite right to children. For instance, the child may feel that the touch lasts too long or is different in some way from the way in which other children are touched.

Once children are informed about “good,” “bad,” or “confusing” touch, respect for children requires that they be given permission to express their feelings about receiving such touches. Children who are trained to recognize how certain touches feel to them and who are encouraged to express their feelings should be allowed to tell the teacher when something does not feel good. Certainly, no child should be made to feel solely responsible for his or her own protection. This training, however, may help children to feel more confident and comfortable talking with adults about potentially inappropriate touch.

One type of touch used in some schools is corporal punishment. Currently, over half of the States have legally prohibited the practices of hitting, paddling, or punishing children with physical force. Practice varies across school systems and jurisdictions. Additionally, research and opinion vary regarding both the effectiveness and impact of corporal punishment. Most studies imply that corporal punishment, on its own, does not teach right from wrong or deter future misbehavior.⁸

There are several considerations regarding physical punishment in schools. When children are “paddled,” school personnel may not always consider alternative or other, more creative forms of punishment. The following case example illustrates the potential benefits of seeking inventive, alternative forms of discipline.

Educators also should be aware that any method of discipline, whether it is time-outs, corporal punishment, or exclusion from activities, can have an unintended impact on an abused or neglected child. Some children who have been abused may actually invite such discipline, if it is the only attention they believe they can get or to which they are entitled. The punishment may be ineffective as a way to stop misbehavior in such instances. Therefore, it is important to try to understand what motivates the child's actions to determine appropriate discipline and encourage good behavior.

PERSONAL COMMITMENTS

For many educators, their professional responsibility is supported by a deep personal commitment to the welfare of children. The value of this personal commitment is significant because without it, child abuse and neglect prevention and treatment efforts would be only superficial or ineffective. It is this sense of personal responsibility to and for children that is perhaps the strongest reason for educators to become involved in the prevention and intervention of child abuse and neglect.

The helping professions, including education, often attract those who would like to help improve the lives of others. Some educators were victims of maltreatment in their own families and these abuses may have left residual scars. As educators learn more about child maltreatment, they may find themselves experiencing strong emotions or feelings. The best solution is to try to understand these feelings and not to ignore them. There are numerous books for people who have survived abusive childhoods that may help, while some educators may want to increase their understanding through therapy. Whatever means they choose, educators need to understand their own personal feelings surrounding child maltreatment.

Case Example

A fourth-grade student was constantly vandalizing school property (e.g., writing on desks, etching words in wooden surfaces, and breaking equipment). For each offense he was sent to the principal's office for a "paddling." When his regular teacher was out for a prolonged illness, the long-term substitute believed that this method was not working and wanted to try a "natural consequences" method. After the next offense (etching obscene words in a wooden table), the boy was required to stay in during recess and after school to sand down and completely refinish the small table. After one or two similar gestures with similar punishments, his vandalism ceased. The punishment was "a lot of work," but he also was getting the individual company of the teacher as they were forced to be together during off hours. The teacher felt that it was this attention that the student craved, and the teacher searched for and found more positive methods for the student to request it.

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