

# Identifying and Reporting Child Maltreatment

*Work with your school psychologist to identify students who are being abused and get them the help they need.*

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*Created in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) to facilitate partnerships between principals and school psychologists and remove barriers to learning. Additional resources are available at [www.nasponline.org/resources/principals](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals).*

Erika's grades have dropped in most subjects over the past two years. She has been unwilling to change clothes for gym class and recently began having frequent emotional outbursts during English Literature as the class reads *Romeo and Juliet*. Her friends have talked with the school counselor about Erika's increased drinking and self-injurious behaviors (e.g., cutting), but she assures the school counselor that she is fine and that her friends are just overreacting. Erika feels accepted by Mrs. Barnes, the art teacher, and after school one day discloses that she was sexually abused by her older cousin during a family vacation just before the start of her freshman year. Mrs. Barnes tries to console Erika but is unsure what she should do with this information.

Child maltreatment affects youth of both sexes and all racial and socioeconomic classes. An estimated 772,000 children were victims of maltreatment in 2008 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010), and 25% of them were in middle school or high school (ages 12–17). The most common form of maltreatment was neglect (63%); physical abuse (20%) and sexual abuse (18%) were the next prominent types. The perpetrators in 80% of the cases were the students' parents. Principals must ensure that their staff members can identify the signs of maltreatment; legally and compassionately respond; and ultimately, prevent further harm to students.

## Warning Signs

Child abuse and neglect can adversely affect the social, emotional, behavioral, and academic functioning of adolescents. Because there is no single, common response pattern among youth who have been maltreated, identifying them can be difficult. Students may not disclose or admit abuse, but educators may see important clues if they are willing to entertain the idea that maltreatment is a possible reason for a student's academic, psychological, and behavioral problems. The

following indicators may signal child abuse or neglect:

- Sudden changes in behavior or school performance
- Sudden change in or rapid fluctuation of emotional state
- Depression or loss of interest in pleasurable activities
- Anxiety or nervousness—fidgety behavior, distractibility, and compulsive actions
- Physical or medical problems that have been brought to the parents' attention but not addressed
- Learning problems (or difficulty concentrating) that cannot be attributed to specific physical or psychological causes
- Watchful or hypervigilant behavior
- Lack of appropriate adult supervision
- Overly compliant, passive, or withdrawn behavior
- Avoidance of home.

Two common reactions among victims are to become more passive and withdrawn or to act out. An adolescent who becomes more passive may assume blame for the abuse; fear that others will discover the abuse, which will put him or her at greater

risk of harm; or believe that there is nothing he or she can do to stop the maltreatment or the negative emotional consequences it causes.

Other adolescents may begin to act out more against peers, parents, other adult authority figures, and even close friends. They may act aggressively in situations that others would perceive as accidents or benign situations. For example, if a youth who has been physically abused is bumped by a peer while waiting in line at the water fountain, the victimized adolescent may respond with instant physical aggression, rather than excusing the encounter as an accident. Administrators may want to keep this possible explanation of behavior in mind when addressing behavioral infractions in the school environment.

Adolescents may have a more intensified reaction to their maltreatment than younger victims because developmentally they are more self-conscious and egocentric and may believe they are the only one who has ever been through this experience. Sexually abused adolescents may also struggle with their own sexuality more than their nonabused peers. They may engage in promiscuous sexual behavior or withdraw from intimate relationships.

### **Mandated Reporting**

All 50 states have mandatory child abuse and neglect reporting laws that name principals and teachers as mandated reporters, which means that they are required by law to report suspected child abuse and neglect. Failure to report is a Class B misdemeanor as a negligent party, and fines may be associated with the offense. In many cases, a report of suspected abuse may be the only hope a student or family

has to receive protection or help.

But teachers have been reluctant to report child abuse and neglect (Kenny, 2004). In one study, 84% of suspected abuse cases in the schools were never reported (Kesner & Robinson, 2002). Teachers may feel that they are insufficiently trained in how to detect child maltreatment or that they lack sufficient knowledge about legal standards and reporting procedures. In an effort to address those limitations or to protect the school's public image, some principals designate themselves or a response team as the primary reporter of all suspicions of abuse, which may confuse teachers. School leaders must ensure that policies aimed at keeping one informed do not interfere with the legal obligation teachers have to make an abuse report.

### **Actions for Principals**

School leaders must recognize their direct and indirect roles in addressing child maltreatment within the schools.

**Establish an explicit, districtwide policy that supports mandated reporting of child maltreatment.** A stated policy, known by all constituents, can help establish a school climate that does not tolerate child maltreatment. Direct communication of this policy to teachers, staff members, and parents ensures that everyone is aware of the school's position that educators must take action if they suspect that a student has suffered maltreatment. This is analogous to a therapist's disclosure of the limits of confidentiality at the beginning of treatment and may mitigate emotional reactions if a report must be made (Domrowski & Gischlar, 2006).

**Provide training for teachers and staff members.** It is not safe to assume that teachers had adequate instruction about child maltreatment and



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## What Is Necessary to Make an Abuse Report?

**“Suspected” abuse.** You need only to suspect or have reasonable cause to believe that a child has been abused or neglected to make an abuse report. You do not need evidence or confirmation of the abuse; it is the role of trained child protective service (CPS) caseworkers to investigate and confirm whether abuse or neglect has occurred.

**The report.** Most states require an oral report, but some states also require a written report. Reports need to be made to either CPS or local law enforcement depending on the age of the child, the age of the alleged perpetrator, and the relationship of the alleged offender to the child.

**Key information.** It is best to have some key details available before making a report. What follows is some of the important information typically requested, but you do not need to have all of this information to make a report:

- The child’s name, date of birth, age, and address
- The child’s present location
- The names, ages, and addresses of any siblings
- The parent’s or caregiver’s name and address
- The specifics of the suspected abuse or neglect (e.g., the nature and extent of the injury

observed; any direct quotes from the child about the abuse or neglect; behavioral observations you have made, especially any specific abuse-related behaviors)

- The reporter’s name, address, and relationship to the child.

### What Next?

Following are questions to consider when addressing child maltreatment in schools:

- How can I best foster a safe school climate that supports educators’ role as mandated reporters?
- Does the district have policy on reporting child maltreatment? Has this policy been effectively communicated to staff members, parents, and students?
- When was the last inservice on identification and reporting of child maltreatment? Does the staff need a refresher session?
- Who are the key school and community professionals who can help students who have been abused? Is this role considered part of their responsibilities?

reporting procedures during their pre-service training or can recall the indicators of abuse or the appropriate level of concern necessary to warrant a report if they did. School mental health providers (e.g., school psychologist, school social worker, school counselor) and community mental health professionals can provide training. Periodic refresher sessions should be offered to accommodate staff turnover and maintain a

continual focus on the topic.

**Support teachers as mandated reporters.** Teachers may be reluctant to report child maltreatment because they fear being wrong, worry about retaliation by the offender or the student’s family, or have a cynical view of the child welfare system. They need to know that their principal is supportive of their efforts to protect students and that they are encouraged to adhere

to legal mandates and district policy. Principals should emphasize that as long as a report is made in good faith, the reporter is protected from any legal liability and that state laws protect the identity of mandated reporters. Staff members should know that if confronted, they can simply state that they were fulfilling a legally mandated obligation and acted in accordance with district policy.

**Maintain a safe school environment for maltreated youth.** Schools must be a safe, healthy place for students. Research shows that the involvement of at least one caring significant adult in the life of the victim is an essential ingredient for positive outcomes. Principals, teachers, secretaries, cooks, and custodians all play a role in creating a respectful and trusting setting.

For example, one important aspect of a safe climate is respect of personal boundaries. In most instances of abuse or neglect, a trusted adult has already harmed the youth's body, so it is necessary that others in the student's life be sensitive to issues of personal space and touch. A student who has been abused may perceive a lack of control in his or her environment, so when administrators establish firm clear limits, it helps maltreated youth feel safe and secure and regain a sense

of personal control.

**Be prepared to respond to a disclosure and report suspected abuse.** The most reliable indicator of child maltreatment is a self-report. Responses to a student's report should be supportive and nonjudgmental and ensure that the adolescent knows that the adult is listening and taking the matter seriously.

Staff members should not overreact emotionally because that might cause the youth to stop reporting or recant what he or she has already said. The staff member should assure the student that he or she did the right thing in telling and that he or she is not to blame for the abuse and will not be disciplined for the disclosure. The educator should tell the student what will be done with the information (make a report to child protective services or the police), give the student some idea of what to expect

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## Resources

### Print

*Child abuse and neglect: The school's response.* C. B. Horton & T. K. Cruise. 2001. New York, NY: Guilford.

*The role of educators in preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect.* C. C. Tower. 2003. Retrieved from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families Web site: [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/educator](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/educator)

Supporting school professionals through the establishment of a school district policy on child maltreatment. S. C. Domrowski & K. L. Gisclar. 2006, Winter. *Education*, 127, 234–243.

### Online

Child Welfare Information Gateway  
[www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)

Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse and Neglect  
[www.smith-lawfirm.com/mandatory\\_reporting.htm](http://www.smith-lawfirm.com/mandatory_reporting.htm)

Prevent Child Abuse America  
[www.preventchildabuse.org](http://www.preventchildabuse.org)

Stop It Now!  
[www.stopitnow.org](http://www.stopitnow.org)

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An unabridged version of this article is available at [www.principals.org/pl0910cruisefull](http://www.principals.org/pl0910cruisefull).



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(e.g., the student may be interviewed by a social worker or police officer).

Should a student say that he or she is afraid of going home after making a self-report or that future harm may occur, the staff member should convey that information to a hotline worker and make alternative arrangements for the student to stay with a trusted adult until protective services can conduct an interview.

**Know the resources that are available.** School psychologists, social workers, and school counselors are professionals who can help prevent child maltreatment, intervene when it occurs, and consult with teachers and students. They will provide informational and emotional support to teachers before, during, and after they call the hotline. Including mental health prevention and intervention

components within the curriculum is another way to lay the groundwork to address child maltreatment effectively. Forming connections with local child protective service workers may also aid in the reporting process or allocation of resources.

### Conclusion

Students are faced with many acts of violence within their homes and in their communities. Child abuse and neglect must not go unnoticed by school leaders. Educators must be trained and supported in recognizing and reporting child maltreatment and be willing to protect the students under their care. Schools should consider adopting a policy that supports mandated reporting and be prepared to maintain a climate of safety. School leaders play a key role in ensuring that their staff members are prepared to address matters of child maltreatment. **PL**

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