

Overcoming Barriers to Reporting Suspicions of Child Abuse & Children Exposed to Family Violence: Part 1

By Pearl Rimer

One phone call can save a child from serious harm, perhaps even death, and yet, suspicions of child abuse are not reported nearly enough. If the system is to succeed in protecting children and supporting families, a community where members follow through on their legal and moral duty to report suspicions of abuse is essential.

Although most people continue to hang on to the idea that children and youth are abused more often by strangers, the reality is that most are harmed by someone known and/or trusted. The number of children and youth who are abused is staggering and yet the numbers of individuals who would *not* report a suspicion of abuse is extremely worrisome. The Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS, 2005) conducted a study in the province with respect to reporting and found the following:

- 54% of individuals surveyed would not report suspected signs of child abuse.
- 55% of individuals said that they would find it difficult to report if the situation involved someone they knew well.
- 48% of respondents said that it would be easier to report a casual acquaintance, while more than 44% felt they would still be hesitant to make a report.

Why Do People Choose not to Report Suspected Abuse?

Many fears, concerns and issues are raised when someone is faced with reporting a suspicion of abuse or violence in the life of a child. A prevalent fear is "What if I'm wrong?" Most people realize that if an investigation occurs, a crisis will be created in the family. Try to change your perspective and say to yourself, "I hope I'm wrong, but I know that I have to make this phone call because I'm worried about the child."

Whom Should You Talk to if You Suspect Abuse?

If you have a gut feeling that "something isn't right," consult with a child protection worker. Only a child

protection worker or police officer is in a legal position to decide if a formal report should be made, and therefore *it is inappropriate to ask anyone else*. The more people you speak to, the more confusing the situation can potentially become, and the more witnesses you create. Asking others for their opinion may result in the failure to report, contaminate or jeopardize an investigation, or put a child in danger.

What if You Fear Retaliation from Parents?

Many individuals fear that the parent may retaliate or make a scene, and consequently ask, "Do I have to leave my name?" Although some jurisdictions allow anonymous calls, the expectation is typically that professionals will give their names. If you



refuse to give your name, you are not acting in the best interests of the child. Authorities cannot call you for more information. If the case goes to court, you may be a valuable witness that cannot be called upon to testify. Furthermore, using your program as a safe place to interview the child will not be an option.

When you make a report, the intake worker should ask how you feel about the family knowing it was you who called. Discuss your options. You may want to tell the parent yourself that you called. (The worker will tell you if you can do that.) Be aware that, even if you do not want your name revealed, a child protection worker has an obligation to tell the parent the nature of the allegation, and will usually identify the agency (e.g., “Someone from the school called”). If you are concerned that your safety may be at risk, let the worker know. She or he may then tell a parent that “someone from the community called.” Nonetheless, it is not unusual for a parent to figure out who made the report. In many cases, the possibilities are limited (e.g., the child is typically in a program or at home).

Upon hearing the allegations, parents may express many emotions, including shock, confusion, anger, fear, disgust and denial. Reinforce that it is your legal duty to call a child protection agency if you are worried about the safety or well-being of a child. Try not to use trigger words like “abuse.” If you ever feel that your safety or the safety of anyone else is at risk, call for police assistance.

Other Reasons People Often Fail to Report Abuse

Be open to the possibility that there are factors that may lead individuals to misinterpret or fail to identify abusive behaviour, including personal biases and experiences. For example, a staff person who is a newcomer themselves may interpret the actions of a parent who is also a newcomer as the result of the lack of support associated with leaving the extended family. Furthermore, staff who come from similar cultures as their clients may not recognize behaviour as abusive within the Canadian context. Having to report someone from your own culture may raise fears that you will be ostracized by the community for betraying them, or perhaps lead you to deny that someone from the same culture as you could hurt a child. Others may not report their suspicions in an effort to protect the newcomer family or a family from their own cultural group from involvement with authorities. Remember, your legal and moral responsibility is to *always* protect children from harm, and failure to do so could have devastating consequences for the child and family.

REFERENCES

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