

Overcoming Barriers to Reporting Suspicions of Child Abuse & Children Exposed to Family Violence: Part 2

By Pearl Rimer

How Can You Maintain a Positive Client Relationship When Abuse is Suspected?

Maintaining a positive client relationship where there is a suspicion of abuse is often a concern for staff. It is helpful if the information given to parents upon registration includes a section that clarifies for families that reporting to a child protection agency is a legal requirement where there are concerns for the safety, well-being or protection of a child. It is also pertinent to include information on the limits of confidentiality, and that informing parents of any calls to a child protection agency or police is done in consultation with authorities. Always reinforce to families that their right to confidentiality is taken very seriously. Once a report has been made, it is recommended that the staff involved and the child protection agency plan together for how to most effectively respond to the situation in a way that will support the child and family, reduce the potential for additional trauma and meet all legal requirements.

What Can You Say to a Parent Who Wants to Remove their Child from the Program?

Despite all the considerations an agency may have made in a situation where authorities have been called, many parents will be embarrassed and will feel that they are being judged. They may respond by threatening to remove their child from the program.

It is helpful to say, “I am not judging you as a parent. I know that it is difficult to raise children, and I know you are doing the best you can. If you take your child out of our program, no matter where they are enrolled, anyone who is worried about their safety will call a child protection agency. That means your child is in a safe environment where staff do not shy away from concerns, but protect the health, well-being and safety of the children in their care. Your child has made friends here and is doing well. It may be difficult for them to start over again. We would like you to stay and let us support you.” If you know that a family has an open file with a child protection agency, you may also want to add, “If you tell us what the Children’s Aid Society wants you to do, we can try to help you get it done.”

It is also common for people to have difficulty believing that child abuse or violence exists in a family where there has been a positive ongoing relationship, or where no obvious indicators or risk factors are present. It must be remembered that child abuse occurs among all socio-economic groups and family structures. In fact, it is not uncommon for abuse to be discovered in families where the possibility would not have been considered. Remember, you only know what you see and hear, and what people choose to tell you.



Putting Child Protection into Perspective

There is often great uneasiness surrounding the fear of a child being apprehended. A pervasive myth continues that child protection workers and police apprehend children first, and ask questions later. Children are only apprehended when there is no other safe option and the child is judged to be in imminent danger. Only a small minority of investigations result in apprehension, and many of these children are returned to their families within a short period of time.

People are also sometimes reluctant to make a report because of past negative experiences with the child protection and/or police systems, either in Canada or in their country of origin. These systems are under stress and may not be ideal; however media focus and discussion among coworkers typically highlights poor outcomes in the system, rather than its successes. There is also concern that child protection workers and police officers will not understand or appreciate families from culturally diverse backgrounds. Although these systems may not always be perfect, ongoing training is conducted, and specialized teams have been created in many jurisdictions in an effort to meet the needs of families represented in their communities.

If Still in Doubt, Put Yourself in the Child's Shoes ...

Although the fears that may plague people faced with reporting are understandable and valid, they do not outweigh our legal and moral duty to protect children. *Remember that in the majority of cases when something terrible happens to a child, someone knew or suspected abuse and did not follow through on reporting suspicions.* If you are anxious, think about how the child may feel. As an adult, you have options and resources available to you. Children have limited, if any, options for protection and must depend on others to speak for them. If child abuse or family violence are suspected and not reported, the child may be at further risk. An individual who suspects abuse and does not report it is working in partnership with the family and/or alleged abuser in continuing to keep it a secret.

It is essential that everyone approach reporting decisions from the child's perspective, remembering that although it is difficult to grapple with a suspicion of child abuse, if abuse is happening, it is unlikely to stop without outside intervention. Reporting to a child protection agency may be the catalyst that brings the family to receive the intervention and support they need to stop the violence before long-term consequences occur.



Pearl Rimer, Dip.C.S., M.E.S., is the Manager of Research & Training at Boost Child Abuse Prevention & Intervention. She designs and conducts award-winning training for community service providers, children and youth. Pearl has dedicated over 25 years to the fields of child care and children's mental health as a consultant, instructor, trainer and research coordinator. For more information please see www.boostforkids.org, or Pearl can be contacted at rimer@boostforkids.org.

