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PREVIEW

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School psychologists' attitudes towards reporting child abuse

Meyers, Marion, Psy.D.

Pace University, 1988

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PREVIEW

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS' ATTITUDES
TOWARDS REPORTING CHILD ABUSE

by

Marion Meyers

A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology
in the Department of Psychology at Pace University

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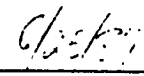
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ABSTRACT

Research on the reporting of child abuse by various groups of professionals has shown that underreporting is a serious and extensive problem despite mandatory reporting laws. Reasons for underreporting tend to cluster into the following categories;

- Lack of knowledge of legal issues and ramifications.
- Lack of knowledge of the symptoms of child abuse.
- Attitudes towards reporting abuse.
- Stereotypes and prior conceptions about abuse may affect the individual's ability to recognise child abuse.

The present study investigated these issues as they apply to school psychologists. A questionnaire, originally developed by Pelcovitz (1977) for use with teachers, was adapted for use with school psychologists. The questionnaire was also updated to include additional questions on sexual abuse. It was sent to a random sample of 50% of the school psychologists in Nassau and Suffolk Counties, Long Island, New York. Forty two and a half percent of the sample returned the questionnaire (N=128).

The vast majority of respondents reported having had the experience of suspecting that a student in their

school was a victim of child abuse, and 86% of the sample indicated that they had reported at least one case of abuse. In general the group displayed adequate awareness of their basic legal obligations in dealing with abused children.

Although the results of this survey often suggested a fair amount of knowledge about child abuse on the part of the psychologists, it became apparent that certain issues presented greater conflict for them and that many respondents were unaware of the importance of certain signs and symptoms of abuse. Thus further areas of training were suggested. The need for specific training in the area of child abuse was also suggested by the fact that approximately half of the sample felt that their training in this area had been inadequate.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The school psychologist is in an excellent position to detect and deal with child abuse. Abused and neglected children manifest many behavioral, emotional and academic problems and are thus likely candidates for referral to the school psychologist. An important step in the treatment and prevention of child abuse is reporting the abuse. Parents who abuse or neglect their children are often reluctant or unable to change without external coercion and/or help.

Research on the reporting of child abuse by various groups of professionals has shown that underreporting is a serious and extensive problem. Despite mandatory reporting laws that typically apply to those people whose professions bring them into regular contact with children (Guyer, 1982), researchers have found that there is still a reluctance to report (James, Womack and Stauss, 1978).

The purpose of the present study was to examine the factors which affect school psychologists' decisions to report child abuse. Although these factors span a variety of different categories, two of the major categories are attitudes toward reporting and knowledge about child abuse.

In this chapter child abuse and neglect will be defined and the incidence, as well as the legal issues involved, will be discussed. A review of the literature on the factors which are thought to affect reporting (i.e. ignorance of symptoms and of legal issues, attitudes, and the role of stereotypes) and the relationship between the school and the abused child (symptoms of abuse and neglect, child abuse and the school, child abuse and the school psychologist) will be presented. This background will clarify the issues which are the focus of this study.

Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (PL 93-247, U.S. Code, 1974) requiring professionals to report suspected abuse defines child abuse and neglect as

Physical or mental injury, sexual abuse, negligent treatment or maltreatment of a child under the age of 18 by a person who is responsible for the child's welfare under circumstances which indicate that the child's health or welfare is harmed or threatened (p.5)

Child abuse and neglect, thus includes physical, emotional, or sexual abuse and physical or emotional

neglect (Queen and Queen, 1980).

Physical abuse is defined by the National Committee for the Prevention of Child abuse as a non-accidental injury or pattern of injuries to the child (Cohn,1983). Tower (1984) defines sexual abuse as any sexual involvement which is imposed on the child by an adult. The National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse (1978) places offenses against children under two categories, touching and non-touching offenses. Touching offenses include intercourse, rape, prostitution and incest, whereas non-touching offenses include voyeurism and exhibitionism.

The National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (1978a) describes emotional abuse as abuse which results in impaired psychological growth and development. Examples of emotional abuse are verbal abuse and placing excessive demands on the child so that the child's self-esteem becomes impaired or his behavior becomes disturbed. Tower (1984) says that emotional abuse specifically includes belittling, rejecting, and, in general not providing a loving atmosphere in which a child can grow.

New York State Law describes a neglected child as one whose physical, mental or emotional condition has become impaired due to the parents' failure to provide

adequate food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care even though financially able or are offered reasonable means to do so (New York State Education Department, 1983). Also included in this definition is abandonment and failure to provide proper supervision.

The legal definitions of child abuse and neglect vary in different states. Some states, for example, do not include emotional neglect in their definitions of abuse, while other states attempt to broaden their definitions of sexual abuse by adding the term, sexual exploitation (Camblin and Prout, 1983).

Kline and Hopper (1975) reviewed the literature on child abuse and found that professional groups vary widely in their definitions of abuse and neglect. They concluded that concepts of child abuse are "value oriented, highly emotional and confused by corporal punishment" (p.16). They felt that a major problem in defining physical abuse was that our society condones physical punishment as a means of discipline and training but looks upon child abuse as an act of criminal deviance. There is no clear demarcation between the two. If a child suffers a non-accidental injury as result of physical punishment does one look at the intent or only the result? If a parent only intended mild physical punishment but ended up injuring

the child is that to be considered child abuse? They feel that definitions of child abuse are confounded by complex societal sanctions. Kline and Hopper also feel that although there has been controversy on whether or not to include psychological or emotional injury in the absence of physical injury, the psychological component is essential in understanding the concept of child abuse.

Garbarino and Garbarino (1980) are less upset by the variety of definitions of child abuse and neglect. They feel that one single definition is not sufficient. They summarize one of the conclusions of a panel convened by the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect which expressed the view that different definitions serve different functions:

Human service workers need a broad definition as a basis for offering and providing preventive and rehabilitative services, while law enforcement and judicial agencies need a narrow definition as a basis for justifying coercive community intervention (p.18).

Legal Issues

Camblin and Prout (1983) sent questionnaires to all 50 States and the District of Columbia in order to

survey their laws and practices of reporting child abuse. They found that all 50 states and the District of Columbia have mandatory reporting laws. All require the reporting of physical and sexual abuse. Only 39 states require the reporting of all kinds of abuse. Nine states do not include emotional neglect, four states exclude abandonment and three states do not include general maltreatment.

The particular professions singled out for mandatory reporting differ from state to state but are intended to include people whose professions bring them into regular contact with children and their families. Typically included are teachers, nurses, social workers, child care workers, physicians, psychologists, and psychiatrists (Guyer, 1982). All states require reporting by school personnel, and 34 states, including New York, require reporting by all school personnel. The remaining 16 states specify various exceptions to this, the most common one being the speech therapist (Camblin and Prout, 1983).

The law does not require certainty or proof before reporting, only suspicion (Knapp, 1983). A report of abuse will lead to an investigation, and it is ultimately up to the child welfare agency or the judge to decide if abuse has occurred.