

Teachers' Resource: **Child Abuse**

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A Heavy Price for Heroics

Shirley J. O'Brien

Although Betsy was a petite 4 1/2-year-old with a mass of tightly curled, light blond hair falling all around her face, she was not what she appeared to be. When she sat on the living room rug with her 3 1/2-year-old sister, the sun literally danced off her hair. She played quietly and seriously with several little dolls, seldom smiling or laughing even when her parents provided teasing interaction with the dolls. Suddenly she threw a doll against the wall and stormed out of the room. As I watched Betsy play, it seemed obvious she found the play frustrating and upsetting. I had been invited by Betsy's parents to hear their story for possible inclusion in a book I was writing about an agonizing and complex topic: child sexual molestation.

Later, when the girls were in their room, Betsy's parents explained to me why all the spirit, joy and happiness had disappeared from Betsy's life. It started when Betsy began exhibiting unusual and rather peculiar behavior. She would often stand on her bed and urinate, screaming at the top of her lungs. She would throw any object within her reach, bite, scratch and generally terrorize both her little sister and the family dog. Her parents hoped it was just a childhood phase. Although they consulted the family doctor and had several sessions with a family therapist, the situation didn't improve.

One day, in the midst of this turmoil, Betsy's mother came home from a shopping trip. As she walked in the back door, she had a sense that something was wrong. She asked where Rick, the 16-year-old babysitter, was. Betsy said, "Rick is in the bathroom."

Betsy also said, "Rick kissed me on the lips." Betsy's mother carefully questioned her and discovered that Rick had also "wanted to see her gina." (Proper words for body parts had always been used in the family.)

Her mother wanted to leave the questioning open, not leading Betsy on, so she continued, "Did he touch you with anything?" She waved her thumb. "Hon, did you cry?" She said, "No, I told him to stop, he was hurting me." Betsy's mother said, "Good for you, Sugar. I'm very proud of you. It is not your fault. You have not done anything wrong."

Betsy's mother took both girls immediately to the pediatrician for an examination. The doctor helped her call the police and Child Protective Services. Interviews, additional physical examinations, and a schedule for individual and group therapy sessions for Betsy and the entire family followed.

Through therapy, Betsy's mother searched for answers to this difficult and agonizing experience. As she checked her bank statement and cancelled checks, she discovered Betsy's outrageous behavior occurred each time Rick had babysat for the girls. Since she paid Rick by check, she realized the dates matched the behavioral eruptions. Suddenly, everything clicked! Rick had been molesting Betsy for over a year.

Since Betsy did not have the cognitive development or language ability to tell her parents what was occurring, she did the only thing she knew to do: act outrageously. Even after the disclosure and the initial therapy sessions, Betsy continued to behave violently. I asked her parents if it was aggressiveness, frustration or anger? Her mother said, "It was all three. She was being sexually explicit, acting out the moles-

tation and trying to kiss us in the French-kissing manner. When we would correct her, she would hit, bite and pinch her sister and kick the dog." The therapist explained that it was fairly common for young molested children to lash out against their family after disclosure. Betsy was saying, "Why didn't you protect me? You must have known it was going on all the time. Why did you let Rick hurt me?" So, after disclosure, it is still a difficult period for parents.

*"It is not your fault.
You have not done
anything wrong."*

As the court day drew near, Betsy's parents consulted lawyers and therapists about whether or not she should testify in Rick's presence. In talking with Betsy, they concluded that she wanted to testify. They realized she would treat the experience as progress in her therapy.

Before the trial, Betsy visited the courtroom several times. She sat in the chair she would sit in when on the stand. She met the judge who was wearing a black robe. She talked back and forth to the lawyer as if the court were in session. Everyone involved believed Betsy was ready for her courtroom appearance.

When the family went into the courtroom, Betsy, being the child that she was, saw Rick and said, "Look! Look who is standing here!" She didn't act a bit afraid of him.

The first witness called was Betsy's mother. She told the story from begin-

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ning to end. When she finished, it was the defense lawyer's turn. He said, "Tell me what happened." Betsy's mother told the story again. This process took over an hour and a half. During this time Betsy colored pictures quietly in the back of the room with her grandmother.

Then it was Betsy's turn. She took one look at Rick and wouldn't talk. Her attorney said, "Tell the judge your name." There was only silence. The judge called a recess. Betsy's attorney then asked Betsy if she were scared, and she said, "Yes." The attorney asked, "Would you like to have the police detective come in here to protect you?" Betsy said, "Yes."

After the recess the detective came back into the room, sat nearby as Betsy opened up. She told the attorney what Rick had done to her. She told him how he kissed her and tried to insert his finger into her vagina. The judge asked her questions, and she answered the questions in a similar way. She was very consistent in telling her story.

When it was the defense attorney's turn, he asked Betsy, "When did this occur? On what date did this happen?" "How did you feel about Rick doing this to you?" Betsy couldn't give the actual dates or even time of day. She couldn't tell the attorney what Rick was wearing or what she was wearing. She couldn't tell the judge how she felt. Although Betsy did know the answers to some of the questions and events, she answered, "I don't know."

Betsy had begun her testimony with confidence and strength. In a strong voice, she had told her story in her own words. The types of questions asked by her attorney and the judge matched her cognitive and language age level. Her confidence faded, however, when the defense attorney began asking his questions.

After observing young children in court, I have found that a large percentage of questions asked of young children are developmentally inappropriate. As children grow and experience more of life, they move through various stages of cognitive and language development. At each stage, they view their world in a different way. Young children, therefore, are often unable to respond to difficult, complex questions in a mature way. This should not be confused with an inability to tell the truth. By age 5, some children can distinguish reality from fantasy. By age 6 or 7, children realize that Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny are fantasy. The key to our understanding what children tell us is to realize their developmental, cognitive and linguistic capabilities. We must apply this understanding, whether asking questions or listening to answers.

In courtroom situations, some children respond to stress much like an adult. At times, the heightened stress helps them focus on the task, prolonging their attention span and providing detailed recall. More frequently, however, young witnesses are overwhelmed with pressure. They regress or are silent.

GUIDELINES

Here are some guidelines for a child's cognitive capabilities, social and emotional responses and language abilities. Whether questioning a child in a courtroom or finding who spilled milk in the family room, these guidelines are useful in asking for clear answers.

Young children assume all people know what is going on in their private, unspoken thoughts. This is why Betsy lashed out after disclosure.

Cognitive Abilities

■ *Egocentrism.* Young children are egocentric. Jean Piaget, the famous Swiss psychologist, tells us that children have difficulty seeing things from someone else's perspective until they reach middle adolescence, age 15 or 16. Young children assume all people know what is going on in their private, unspoken thoughts. This is why Betsy lashed out after disclosure. She assumed her parents had known that Rick was molesting her. Piaget also says that young children often think they are the cause of things that occur. One of the first statements that Betsy's mother said to her was, "It was not your fault, Betsy. You have not done anything wrong."

■ *Literal Thinkers.* Young children are literal in their thinking. They neither understand analogies or metaphors nor deal in symbolic terms. They interpret the activities and events around them narrowly. In questioning children, we need to be very specific in choosing our words. We need to use simple, direct language. Questions like, "If you were a little girl in Betsy's place, how would you react?" do not make sense to young children. They are not able to think beyond their experiential world.

■ *Levels of "WH" Questions.* Children's understanding of WH questions develops with age. *What* and *where* questions develop first, usually between ages 3 and 4. *Who* questions develop next, followed by *when* and *why*. Finally, by age 7 or 8, *whose* and *how* are comprehended.

■ *Observation and Analysis of Thought.* Children younger than 10 are usually unable to analyze their own thoughts or reflect on events; they may not be able to recall how they felt about a past event. Perhaps this is why Betsy said, "I don't know" when the defense attorney asked her how she felt when Rick did those things to her. Even as adults, feelings are often difficult to describe and interpret.

■ *Short-Term Memory.* Children's short-term memory is not as developed as adults'. They cannot follow long, complex sentences with *if/then* structure. It is wise to avoid compound sentences, complex clauses and *if/then* questions. Young children also have difficulty understanding causal relationships such as, "If this happens, then that will be the result." Although the question "Did you know that if you tell lies about Rick, he might have to go to jail and he can't live at home with his family anymore?" is unfair and unscrupulous, it may not have made any sense to Betsy. It's easy to see why she didn't understand the question.

■ *Single Concepts.* Young children track one idea at a time. They cannot balance several ideas at once. They cannot compare and contrast issues. These skills come much later—some would say near the end of graduate school!

Social and Emotional Responses

■ *Adults Tell the Truth.* Young children tend to believe adults always tell the truth. They may agree to statements that are false when an adult makes them. A question like, "I am not sure you are telling me the truth when you said that Rick hurt you" may confuse and bewilder Betsy.

■ *Children Try To Please Adults.* Young children are anxious to please adults. In their eagerness to please, they may fabricate answers to questions they do not understand.

■ *Repeated Questions.* When young children are asked the same question several times, they may provide different answers each time. They think they aren't getting the answer right the first time. Although Betsy was consistent in her story, she had a difficult time with specific, repeated questions about the events and dates, as well as her feelings about Rick's actions.

Language Ability

■ *Understand More Language.* Young children usually understand language more complex than they can reproduce. Although they really have a clear understanding of the event, they may not be able to answer specific questions about the event. Betsy could tell her story very clearly. Yet, when the defense attorney asked her specific questions about what had happened, Betsy said, "I don't know."

■ *Tenses.* It is easiest for young children to understand the present tense. The present tense describes the here-and-now. The most difficult tense to understand is the past perfect. In questioning children under age 8, it is best to stay with present, past or future tense.

■ *Limited Vocabulary.* Young children have a greater understanding vocabulary than speaking vocabulary. Adults trying to elicit clear answers to questions should use short words in simple sentences.

■ *Pronoun Confusion.* Young children may confuse people and the pronouns substituted for people. For clarity, it is better to consistently use a person's name rather than *he, she* or *they* when referring to specific people.

Summary

After several more hours of testimony from Betsy's father, the therapists, the detective, Rick and Rick's father, the judge finally made a decision: Rick was guilty of child molestation. Although everyone was exhausted, Betsy's parents were proud of her. She had been a brave girl at age 4 1/2. The attorney informed her she was the youngest child ever to have testified at a trial in that courtroom.

Unfortunately, after the trial many of Betsy's behavioral problems returned. She was afraid to sleep in her own bed. She had nightmares about detached hands chasing her. She experienced separation anxiety. If Betsy were at the grocery store and someone stepped between her mother and her, Betsy became hysterical.

The morning I observed Betsy playing with her dolls, it was obvious that she was disturbed and upset. Over time and through many therapy sessions, Betsy has slowly begun the healing process. Molestation and the trial have taken their toll on this innocent child. Scars will last a lifetime not only for Betsy and her family, but also for Rick and his family.

Deciding whether or not to have a child testify in a sexual molestation case is one of the most difficult decisions one could ever face. Legislatures in most states have passed statutes acknowledging better ways to present children's testimony in court. Videotaped depositions and closed-circuit television are two such alternatives. Although Betsy is a little pioneer in this field, she carries a heavy price for her heroics. Prosecutors should realize that winning a case while destroying a child isn't really winning anything at all. Prevention of molestation is still the only win-win answer.

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When a Child Discloses Sexual Abuse:

Immediate and Appropriate Teacher Responses

J. Sue Austin

Jenny, a 6-year-old 1st-grader, began her school year as a bubbly, outgoing child who easily developed positive relationships with teachers and other children. After five months of school, however, Jenny suddenly began to spend her class time sitting quietly. She even sat alone at recess, which represented a big change in her behavior. She rarely smiled and often appeared to be in a daze. She no longer interacted with the other children. Her teacher noticed this drastic change in Jenny's behavior and began to pay more attention to her.

Eventually, Jenny told her teacher—in graphic detail—about the sexual abuse she was subjected to by her stepfather. By law, the teacher was required to inform the school principal, as well as children's protective services, about her discovery. Knowing that her principal was reluctant to have the school involved in anything but the most unambiguous cases of abuse, the teacher felt compelled to question Jenny thoroughly before reporting the abuse. Because the principal was fearful of falsely accusing a parent of child abuse, he also questioned Jenny. Finding Jenny's story to be credible, the principal called child protective services. Investigators interviewed Jenny again in order to determine whether or not to retain the child until her stepfather could be removed from the home. Because of the criminal implications, law enforcement officers became involved. They, too, questioned Jenny.

The ordeal did not end there. In an effort to validate her story, Jenny was examined by a physician. Later, the prosecutor interviewed Jenny to determine whether to prosecute. Eventually, Jenny had to testify in court while her stepfather sat across the room from her. By that time, Jenny had been required to give details of the abuse *at least six times*. During her testimony, Jenny was clearly frightened. She cried and trembled; at times, she refused to speak. She stumbled over her words. Because Jenny's story was inconsistent with the report made by child protective services and law enforcement officers, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty. Jenny's mother did not believe Jenny, and she remained married to the stepfather. Consequently, Jenny was forced to continue living in the same house with the man.

Tragically, this scenario is not uncommon. In the absence of a national reporting system for crimes against children, the statistics on child abuse

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tend to be unreliable. Over the past two years, however, the author, a forensic interviewer from a small, rural southern community, has interviewed over 400 children to determine whether abuse had occurred.

When children disclose abuse, they do so for a variety of reasons. With young children, such disclosure is often accidental. They may make statements that lead the teacher to suspect abuse. They may tell a friend, who then tells the teacher. They may write about the abuse in a journal. They may behave in ways that lead the teacher to wonder about the child. Or the child may simply be ready to act in order to stop the abuse, and feel sufficiently comfortable with the teacher to make the disclosure. Teachers are often the first to learn about abuse because children frequently

choose them as a safe haven for disclosure. This is the point at which the teacher's response is critical.

Many teachers are at a loss when a child discloses sexual abuse. It is sometimes hard to believe that a neighbor, a parent, or even another teacher—someone you know personally—might force sexual activity with a child. Somehow, it is much easier to believe when it involves another child from another school in another area. The author hopes to decrease children's trauma by educating teachers on the appropriate way to respond to these disclosures.

Schools located in communities with a Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) are better equipped to handle such problems. Children's Advocacy Centers provide a safe place for children who have been victimized by severe physical or sexual abuse, and promote collaboration among social service agencies. A CAC is a non-threatening, child-friendly place where the child may participate in a one-time interview (usually videotaped) conducted by a trained forensic interviewer. By taping the initial interview, the CAC decreases the number of times the child has to repeat the story, thus decreasing the trauma to the child and increasing the likelihood that the child's story will be believed. The CAC provides a resource for child protective services, the district attorney's office, law enforcement officials, and other professionals concerned with child abuse. Teachers, parents, and investigators can refer child victims directly to the center.

The CAC also serves as a resource, helping teachers and other school officials to deal more effectively with a child who has disclosed abuse. The most important goal is to reduce the trauma suffered by these victims of abuse and their families.

A significant number of studies have been conducted on child sexual abuse and the problems associated with talking to the child about the abuse (Baladerian, 1999; Faller, 1998; Goodman & Bottoms, 1993; Hertica, 1999; Matthews & Saywitz, 1992; Stein-metz, 1997; Walker, 1994). Recommendations for appropriate responses include:

- *Remain calm and reassuring.* The child already feels anxious and, quite possibly, is fearful that he or she will not be be-

lieved, or that the disclosure will cause people to get into trouble. In order to minimize the child's anxiety, it is important to speak quietly and refrain from panicking. The child may misconstrue any negative reaction you make as being directed toward him or her, thus increasing the child's shame and guilt, or discouraging the child from continuing.

- *Take the child to a private place.* Do not question a child within earshot of other children or adults. Sexual abuse is a private matter, and the child deserves and needs to feel respected. Choose the counselor's or nurse's office (or some other neutral place) over the principal's office, which children often perceive as an intimidating place.

- *Position yourself at the child's eye level.* The adult-child height difference needs to be minimized as much as possible in order to make the child more comfortable. When adults put themselves on a child's level, it gives children a sense of being in control, which they do not have with an abuser. Convey your acceptance by maintaining an open, relaxed posture.

- *Speak on the child's level.* Use language appropriate to the child's developmental level, just as you would in the classroom. Accept the child's version of sexual terms (e.g., if he or she uses street language), rather than translating the child's words into adult language.

- *Listen intently.* Pay attention to what the child is saying so that he or she does not have to repeat it. Do

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not coerce the child to disclose more than he or she is willing to say at the time. Use minimal prompts such as “Um hmm,” “I see,” or head nodding to encourage the child to continue. Also use reflective listening statements such as, “I know this is hard to talk about and I want to help you.”

- **Take the child seriously.** Children frequently feel that they are less important than adults and that they will not be believed. Regardless of how shocked you are or how difficult it is for you to believe that abuse occurred, act as though you do believe the child. Abusers come from every walk of life, including well-respected community figures. Convey to the child that what he or she has to say is important. Be aware that children receive subtle messages from adults and may feel inclined to respond in a way they believe the adult wants. For example, if the child tells you his stepfather touched his private part and you respond with, “Oh, I’m sure it was an accident,” the child may not continue the disclosure, or he may agree with you because you are the adult.

- **Obtain only the information necessary to make a report.** When a child provides minimal information about what happened, such as, “Mr. E touched me in the wrong spot,” a follow-up question is needed. For example, you may ask, “Do you have another name for your wrong spot?” If the child is reluctant to give you another name, you may draw a gingerbread figure and ask the child to put an “X” on the wrong spot. Remember that the goal is to minimize the number of times a child has to repeat the story. Since you are not an investigator, save additional interrogatory questions for those who are.

- **Do not put words in the child’s mouth.** If the child says, “Mr. E touched me in the wrong spot,” do not respond with information the child did not give you. For example,

you should not say, “Did Mr. E touch you in your private area?” “Wrong spot” to one child may mean on the back, while to another it means the private area.

- **Do not use words that the child has not already used.** For example,

example, if the child says, “Mr. E touched my vagina,” do not ask if Mr. E put something in her vagina. Knowing that Mr. E touched the child’s vagina is enough to warrant a call to child protective services.

- **Refrain from using “why” ques-**

Regardless of how shocked you are or how difficult it is for you to believe that abuse occurred, act as though you do believe the child.

if the child tells you Mr. E put his “weenie” in her, do not respond by asking, “He put his penis in you?” Every time a child uses a word that does not sound like typical language for his/her age, investigators, attorneys, judges, and juries may become suspicious that someone has coached the child.

- **Allow the child to have feelings.** Children who have been sexually abused typically have feelings of guilt, shame, fear, ambivalence, etc. They are frequently very confused and may feel to blame for the abuse. Reflect the child’s feelings and let him/her know that those feelings are normal.

- **Reassure the child that the abuse is not his or her fault.** Remind the child that it is the adult who is supposed to act responsibly. Tell the child that even if he/she enjoyed it, did not stop it, etc., the adult is still at fault. Remind the child that he or she did nothing wrong, either by participating in the sexual act or by telling.

- **Begin with general, open-ended questions or statements.** Make statements such as, “Tell me what happened,” and then allow the child to tell the story without interruption. Let the child control the discussion. Do not ask for specific details that are unnecessary at this stage. For

tions. Rather than asking, “Why were you watching the dirty video with Mr. E?” ask “How did it happen that you were watching the video with Mr. E?” or “Whose idea was it to watch the video?” “What” and “how” questions are preferable.

- **Do not condemn the abuser.** The abuser is often a parent, other family member, or friend of the child. Condemning the abuser may make the child feel that there is something wrong with him/her for liking that person.

- **Assure the child that he or she is not alone.** Tell the child that abuse happens to many children and that adults want to help. If you were once a victim yourself, however, do not share that information with the child.

- **Let the child know you are willing to help.** Tell the child that you will do whatever is necessary to help him/her feel safe.

- **Do not touch the child without permission.** Because of the abuse experience, the child may not feel comfortable being touched by you. To be on the safe side, you should ask the child if he/she would like to be hugged.

- **Tell the truth.** Do not make false promises or tell the child nothing bad is going to happen. The truth is that something bad

probably will happen, but it is not your place to tell the child.

- **Inform the child of the process you must follow.** The child must be told in as honest and reassuring a manner as possible that other people must be told about the abuse, and that the child will remain with someone safe until the authorities have arrived. This information is better left unsaid until the end of the discussion. *Under no circumstances should you allow the child to return to the home of the abuser. That is a decision for someone from child protective services or a law enforcement officer.*

- **Thank the child for confiding in you.** Reassure the child that even though it was hard to do and that he/she is afraid, feels guilty, etc., telling you about the abuse was the right thing to do.

- **Help the child devise a safety plan.** Have the child determine what to do if abuse occurs again. Remind the child to tell a trusted adult right away. If you believe that there is no reliable adult at home for the child to tell, give him or her permission to tell a teacher, school counselor, or nurse.

At times, a child discloses information that is not clearly a case for protective services or officers of the law. However, it is not the responsibility of the teacher to determine whether the disclosure is true or fabricated. In addition, children's initial disclosures are often a cry for help, and so they may not include more severe aspects of the abuse. Rather, the child may provide just enough information to get the teacher's attention. Once the case is reported and the child is in the hands of the protecting agency, more details may emerge. For this reason, teachers need to take all disclosures seriously. When in doubt about what to do, the teacher should say honestly to the child, "I am not sure what is going to happen now. I have to call someone whose job is to help keep children safe and find out what

to do. Someone else may need to talk to you, but I will be here for you whenever you need me. It's good that you told me."

Again, reassure the child that he or she has done nothing wrong. You are mandated to call protective services even if you only suspect abuse; therefore, you should have little doubt about what to do when a child tells you that he or she has been sexually abused. If you are confused about whether to report, call protective services and offer a hypothetical question to determine whether it is a case for their agency. After you have reported the case to protective services, regardless of the result, the child will need your continued support. Remind the child that you are willing to listen any time he or she needs to talk. Remember, however, that you should never ask the child for details about the abuse—instead, just listen.

Teaching undoubtedly would be more enjoyable if teachers could just teach and not have to deal with bad things happening to innocent children. The fact remains, however, that bad things *do* happen. As a teacher, you are in an ideal position to protect children from abuse by being sensitive to the child's needs, and by making yourself a safe person to whom the child can disclose sensitive information. In addition, by responding to the child's disclosure appropriately so that the child's statement is not tainted, you can help ensure that the child gets help and that the offender will not be able to harm other children.

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- National Foundation To Prevent Child Sexual Abuse
www.childsexualabuse.org

Reaching and Teaching Abused Children

Marilyn E. Gootman

Millions of children in the United States carry more than their book bags to school each day. They haul the baggage of abuse straight into the classroom. And what do they unpack? Pain masquerading in the guise of misbehavior and underachievement. And who gets blamed? Teachers. When troubled children misbehave and underachieve, their teachers are often accused of incompetence. Feeling like failures, teachers themselves accept the blame when they are unable to reach these children.

Teachers are not to blame! Standard classroom management techniques do not work so well for abused children as for children who misbehave and underachieve because of immaturity, lack of motivation or attention deficit disorder. Abused children's baggage is too heavy.

Teachers have a legal and moral responsibility to report suspected abuse. They must be adequately trained to recognize the physical and behavioral signs of abuse or neglect. Once teachers report suspected abuse or neglect, however, they still have to deal with the ramifications of this abuse. They still have to contend with the leaden baggage of abuse on a daily basis.

In the classroom, many abused children act out their searing pain because they cannot express it in words. They act out this pain in disruptive, annoying and frustrating ways—through behaving aggressively, hurting others without seeming to care, deliberately annoy-

ing others, being hypervigilant, dissociating themselves, fearing failure, and other dysfunctional behaviors. Not all children who behave this way have been abused. Consequently, this behavior should not be used as the sole criterion for reporting suspected abuse. If the children who exhibit any of these behaviors *have* been abused, then teachers must stop blaming themselves or the children for the problems. Instead, by seeing these behaviors as frantic signals for help and by understanding their causes, teachers can help these students learn socially acceptable coping strategies (Morrow, 1987).

But can teachers make a difference in less than a year, for just a few hours a day? Can teachers really help without devoting their full attention to one child or becoming therapists? Absolutely! Alice Miller, author of several books on abused children, stresses that teachers, among others, can be "enlightened witnesses" for abused children. By believing that there is a core of goodness within each child and that children are not to blame for their abuse, an "enlightened witness" can help children overcome the trauma of mistreatment (Miller, 1990).

Zimrin's research with adults who had been abused as children confirms the importance of such a witness. Zimrin found that abused children who grew up to be healthy, nonabusing adults knew an adult during their childhood who treated them with empathy and encourage-

ment and inspired confidence in them. Children who did not have such an adult were not so fortunate. Their dysfunction continued into adulthood. Zimrin includes teachers in her list of possible adult supporters. She stresses that being such a supporter does not require extra time, just sincerity and confidence in these children (Zimrin, 1986).

Zimrin found that abused children who grew up to be healthy nonabusing adults knew an adult during their childhood who treated them with empathy and courage.

Teachers who perceive abused children as "wounded" and "victimized" rather than "mean," "lazy," "stubborn" or "bad" can begin to become "enlightened witnesses." Trust, empathy and the patience to help wounded children develop socially acceptable coping strategies can plant healthy seeds within the child that will flower in the future. The key lies in acknowledging that

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these children are not at fault, understanding the nature and origin of their behaviors and then using the classroom experience to counterbalance the situation. Keep in mind the complexities of people and their relationships and recognize that behaviors can have more than one origin and more than one solution.

The behaviors discussed below are some of the more common dysfunctional behaviors manifested by abused children in the classroom.

Behaving Aggressively

Some children seem to be constantly fighting with others. They often pick fights for seemingly trivial reasons. They are aggressive and rarely hesitate to hit when angry.

Origin #1. All children identify with their parents. Abused children are no exception. As part of the process of identification, children copy parental behavior whether or not the behavior is worthy of copying. If parents hit their children, their children will hit others. If parents have no impulse control and lash out when they are angry, their children will do the same. Many children who have been treated aggressively at home carry that learned aggressiveness into the classroom.

Strategy #1. Children also identify with teachers. If teachers “keep their cool” when angry, restraining themselves from lashing out at students either verbally or physically, they can counterbalance aggressive models children may observe at home. A teacher who remains calm, yet firm, when angry can replace the aggressive parent model and become a constructive source of identification. Staying calm does not mean ignoring inappropriate behavior. Rather, it means staying calm when dealing with it.

Origin #2. Abused children are usually enraged by their mistreatment. Anybody who is abused has a right to be furious. Their rage silently fomented within them be-

cause expressing their anger would antagonize their abusers and generate further mistreatment. But rage can only boil within for so long before spilling out.

No one has the right to tell someone else how to feel.

Abused children spill their rage on “safe” targets, such as classmates and teachers, rather than on those who instigate it. They seem angry all the time and are constantly getting into fights.

Strategy #2. While their rage is certainly a justified response to abuse, taking it out on others is not. Angry children need to learn that while they are entitled to their anger (as well as to other feelings), they are not entitled to express their anger through hurtfulness and aggression toward others. Three basic components to helping abused children deal constructively with their anger are:

- *Acknowledgment.* Acknowledge when they are angry, recognizing that they are entitled to their feelings. Bring the anger to the children’s attention and then help them to recognize their own personal symptoms of anger—getting hot, shaky, sweaty, cold. Help them figure out their physical responses. Each person’s reactions are different. Do not try to deny the anger or convince the children that they have no right to be angry. They will only become angrier. No one has the right to tell someone else how to feel. Try not to get angry at children for being angry. Remember, you are not responsible for their anger so don’t take it personally. Also, try not to be afraid of angry children, lest it render you powerless.

- *Cooling down.* Once children

recognize the symptoms of anger, help them learn cool-down techniques, such as deep breathing, counting backward from ten, writing, drawing, painting, scribbling, making something or listening to music. Find something that works for them personally and helps them release tension.

- *Verbalization.* Encourage children to put their feelings into words. Focus on the feelings behind the anger smokescreen. Listen. You do not have to agree, but they need to be heard. The goal is to teach children to substitute words for actions when they are angry. Also, remember to be encouraging when children behave with self-control and do not act out.

Abused children are usually enraged by their mistreatment.

Origin #3. There is absolutely nothing children can do to protect themselves from a powerful, abusive adult. Abused children are terrified of re-experiencing the utter helplessness and powerlessness they suffered during abuse. When they fear that their safety or self-esteem may be threatened again, they try to replace helplessness with power by becoming aggressive and lashing out. They try to achieve mastery over a previously passively experienced danger, by being able to predict when the punishment will come and thus prepare themselves (Green, 1985).

Strategy #3. The key to helping abused children lies in giving them a positive sense of power and control over their own destiny. Allow them to make choices about their work. Involve them and all their classmates in determining classroom rules. When they break a rule, let them help you decide on an appropriate consequence. Encourage

them to adopt a problem-solving approach: "This is what I did, this is what I can do next time instead."

Hurting Others Without Seeming To Care

Some children hurt others and do not seem to care that they have inflicted pain. They seem cold, hard and unfeeling.

Origin. Many abused children are hurt so often that they finally close off their minds from feeling. The only way they can tolerate their suffering is by suppressing their feelings so that they are no longer aware of them. But as Alice Miller notes, "The repression of our suffering destroys our empathy for the suffering of others" (Miller, 1990). Children who cannot feel their own pain do not know that others feel pain. Pain is a foreign concept for them. They are unaware that others feel pain and, therefore, hurt without feeling empathy for their victims.

Strategy. Even if they are ignorant about pain, no children should ever be allowed to hurt others. Children must be directly confronted and stopped when they cause pain and be told that they are hurting others.

A predictable environment is essential for abused children.

"Stop that. When you poke Billy with the ruler, it hurts."

Acknowledge when children are hurt. Because they have numbed themselves from feeling pain, abused children are often unaware that they have been hurt. They may act totally unaware of an injury they have sustained, such as a serious cut or bruise. Saying "That must have hurt when you fell off the swing" helps them to acknowledge their

own hurts. At first they may deny that they are feeling pain and may act as if they do not know what you are talking about. Nevertheless, they need to be reminded when they hurt in order to reawaken their feelings. Once they feel their own pain, they will learn to acknowledge the pain of others as well.

Try to help them see that pain is an alarm that warns them to cry for help (Terr, 1990). Do not be concerned if their initial response to pain is exaggerated. This is a common reaction when the senses are reawakened.

Deliberately Annoying Others

Some children will do anything to deliberately annoy the teacher or classmates. They tap on desks, drop pencils, constantly interrupt, argue about everything and often go out of their way to disobey.

Origin #1. Often, abuse happens spontaneously, without misbehavior or provocation on the part of children. Abused children frequently have no idea when they will be hit. The unpredictability terrifies many children and renders them totally helpless. In order to overcome this sense of powerlessness, some children deliberately provoke as if to say, "I will misbehave so that I will be in control and know exactly when I will be punished."

Strategy #1. A predictable environment is essential for abused children. Knowing the routines of the day—when they eat, when they go to recess, when they study math—reassures them that order, rather than chaos, is the modus operandi in the class. They also need to know when routines will be changed (e.g., for a class play or a field trip). Advance preparation eliminates the fear of randomness and helplessness. In addition to routines, clearly stated rules and consequences are essential for creating a predictable environment. Knowing in advance what is expected of them gives chil-

dren a sense of self-control and responsibility.

Origin #2. Some children receive very little stimulation except when they are being abused. They so desperately want to be touched and noticed that they will even provoke punishment in order to get atten-

Some children receive very little stimulation except when they are being abused.

tion. They transfer this behavior into the classroom and deliberately annoy teachers to get attention.

Strategy #2. Annoying children are often ignored because "they are just looking for attention." They are usually looking for attention because they need it and if positive attention is not given, these children will demand negative attention. Praising them for improvement or accomplishments is positive attention. Giving them responsibilities in the classroom—such as taking care of a pet, delivering messages to the office or erasing the blackboards—is positive attention (if you fear you cannot trust them alone, pair them up with a more responsible child). Calling when they are absent or listening to their ideas is positive attention. Having them share a hobby or special knowledge with the class is positive attention. Such positive recognition helps convince children that they are worthwhile human beings and encourages them to seek recognition in socially acceptable ways.

Being Hypervigilant

Some children always seem to be on guard and are hypervigilant while sitting passively. They are fearful, suspicious and mistrustful—always

on the lookout for potential dangers. These children are acutely sensitive to mood, tone of voice, facial expression and bodily movement. Often they are afraid to express their own ideas.

Origin. Abuse is unpredictable. Children never know when they are going to “get it” next. Abusers are impulsive and often lash out unexpectedly with no rhyme or reason. Therefore, abused children have to remain constantly on guard. They also have to remain on guard in the outside world lest an event occur that might trigger the same feelings of helplessness and panic. Hence, their frequent state of “frozen watchfulness” (Ounsted, Oppenheimer & Lindsay, 1974). Unfortunately, because they are using their receptors to identify potential dangers, they may not use them to process the environment, thus compromising their learning (Green, 1985).

Strategy. A predictable environment is essential for hypervigilant children. Clearly stated routines, rules and consequences that are consistently followed will *gradually* help reduce their hyper-alertness. These children also need teachers who remain calm and who do not explode in unpredictable outbursts.

Dissociating Themselves

Some children become trance-like in school. They may appear “spacey” and forgetful and frequently daydream. Through the process of dissociation, they remove their minds from their bodies. Some of these children read and do not seem to be processing what they are reading. When carried to the extreme, dissociation can lead to multiple personalities. Scientists believe that some children may have a genetic predisposition to this form of coping.

Origin. Many children dissociate or hypnotize themselves, separating their minds from their bodies to escape overwhelming

thoughts, emotions and sensations they experience during abuse (James, 1989). They also dissociate to defend themselves against any event that might trigger memories of their original suffering. Therefore, they may become spacey or dissociative in school when they experience an echo of their painful experience. Even a seemingly innocuous story in a reading book could trigger this reaction.

Strategy. First, try to recognize when this happens to your students. It is neither the children’s fault nor yours. Children do not deliberately go into a trance and you have not knowingly caused it. Try to stand by these children and gently bring them back, perhaps by softly calling their name. Do not reprimand children for dissociating. Privately help children become aware of what is happening (“I notice that when . . .”). Also help children to identify and sort out feelings of sadness, anger and happiness. Make children aware that each person has many feelings and that thoughts and feelings are not the same as actions. Nobody will punish or reject them for their thoughts and feelings (James, 1989).

Fearing Failure

Some children seem to give up before they even try. They may cry and tremble when faced with a new lesson or activity. “I can’t” is their favorite phrase. Some try so hard to get everything just right, that they never finish their work.

Origin. Some parents hold unrealistically high expectations for their children. When the children fail to meet these expectations, they heap physical and/or emotional abuse upon them. “How can you be so stupid?” and “What’s the matter with you, dummy?” can hurt just as much as the sting of a belt. These children are paralyzed by the fear that they will make a mistake.

Strategy #1. Try to have a fail-safe environment in the classroom.

Allow children to correct papers until they are right, rather than grading them. Break work down into small segments that are easier to grasp. Also, your contact with parents must be very circumspect. Try to be as positive as you can, rather than venting your frustration with their child’s behavior.

Some parents hold unrealistically high expectations for their children.

When the children fail to meet these expectations, they heap physical and/ or emotional abuse upon them.

Strategy #2. Use a problem-solving model for dealing with misbehavior: 1) state the problem, 2) brainstorm solutions, 3) choose a solution, 4) implement the solution, 5) evaluate whether the solution is working and 6) if the solution fails, return to step 2. Problem-solving helps children learn that we all make mistakes and that mistakes are part of learning.

Conclusion

The key to working with the discipline problems presented by abused children lies in understanding the origins of their misbehavior and then designing strategies to counteract these origins. Ten basic strategies emerge from this approach:

- Modeling appropriate behavior. Children do as we do. If we want them to have self-control, then

teachers must model self-control and not lash out hurtfully.

- Directly confronting hurtfulness. Regardless of children's pain, they must not be allowed to hurt others either physically or emotionally. Some children will assume approval of their actions if they are not directly told to stop them.

- Acknowledging pain and other feelings. Children who cannot feel for themselves cannot feel for others. Helping them acknowledge their own feelings will increase their awareness of others' feelings.

- Teaching anger management skills. Expressing anger in words rather than actions is a skill that can and must be directly taught to children.

- Teaching problem-solving skills. Problem-solving can help children who feel totally helpless and overwhelmed realize that they can gain some sense of control in many aspects of their lives.

- Establishing routines and a predictable, stable environment. Chaotic home environments create anxiety and tension that are often transferred into the classroom. Classroom predictability and stability can help diminish this hyper-alert, hyper-reactive state.

- Setting fair, meaningful limits and consequences. Overly restrictive rules and harsh consequences are commonplace in abusive homes. It is essential that classrooms counteract this situation.

- Providing opportunities for choice and decision-making. Children who feel totally powerless in their home lives can gain a sense of self-respect and empowerment when given the opportunity to make choices and decisions in school. ■ Helping children find an area of interest and expertise. Children who feel doomed to failure and who are constantly reminded of their inadequacies can overcome their negative self-image by becoming an "expert" in an area that captures their attention.

- Focusing on the positive through recognition and encouragement. Honest, sincere, positive feedback is a basic need for every human being.

While it would be a natural tendency to be angry at these [parents] and treat them with hostility, try to look at them as troubled human beings who need some support and encouragement.

Often, teachers solicit parents' help when their children are being disruptive in the classroom. It certainly makes sense for parents and teachers to work together to solve problems. If you suspect that parents may be abusing their children, however, do not ask them to help you with disruptive behavior or even with homework. This will likely generate further abuse. Try to be as positive as you can about their children. While it would be a natural tendency to be angry at these people and treat them with hostility, try to look at them as troubled human beings who need some support and encouragement. Certainly, if you have evidence of abuse, report it immediately.

Approximately 2.5 million American children are abused annually. You will probably meet several of them during your teaching career. Their behavior is often exasperating. They pose a challenge to the best of teachers. But remember, they will likely continue along this destructive path unless an "enlightened witness" steps forward.

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Should Young Children Be Asked To Protect Themselves?

Rebecca Isbell and Brent Morrow

Sexual abuse prevention programs exist throughout the United States and are often mandated for preschoolers as well as school-age children. In response to the very real problem of sexual abuse, these well-intended programs were developed to teach children to recognize and prevent abuse. With respect to young children, however, the effectiveness of such programs may be questioned.

Young children, according to Jean Piaget (1963), are in the preoperational stage of cognitive development. In this stage, their understanding of the world is bound to their concrete experiences. They have difficulty comprehending abstract ideas and generalizing information to unfamiliar situations. Young children also make judgments based on visual outcomes without consideration of underlying meanings.

The characteristics of young children's thinking have profound influence on their understanding of information presented in sexual abuse prevention programs. The comprehension of several basic concepts is critical for young children if they are to protect themselves and report an incident to an appropriate adult. In a compre-

hensive study of child sexual abuse prevention programs, the Berkeley Family Welfare Research Group (Gilbert, Berrick, Prohn & Nyman, 1989) examined the curricula of seven sexual abuse prevention programs that are used with young children. They reported that young children found it difficult to understand some of the programs' basic components.

A key concept of sexual abuse prevention programs is the distinction between a "good touch" and a "bad touch" (de Young, 1988). The distinction is critical, as the child must be able to recognize what constitutes abuse. This idea is further expanded to include the identification of the "confusing touch." This abstract continuum of the types of touch requires young children to label the touch and then to generalize this information to other situations. Can young children, at their level of cognitive development, really be expected to learn that genital touch by some adults could be a good touch (a parent bathing them) or a bad touch (molestation)? Researchers who have interviewed child molesters report that offenders commonly desensitize children to touch by gradually moving from nonsexual to sexual touching (Conte, Wolf & Smith, 1989). They suggest that by the time young children become aware that a bad touch has been perpetrated upon them, they might feel they have given consent.

Young children attribute good qualities to those people who treat them in positive ways. This view of adults presents problems for young children as they attempt to understand that a "good" person can do "bad" things. This inconsistency is confusing to young children for their judgments are based on the outcomes they experience, not the intent of the adult. Many abusers establish a trusting relationship with children by giving them special attention, expressing love and gentle contacts. The young child is then unable to determine that this good person has bad motives. Young children cannot understand that a person can be both good and bad at the same time.

Another abstract concept that is included in many programs is the meaning of secrets. Many young children understand a secret to be something whispered in their ear. Young children are taught that good secrets make you happy and should be kept, but bad secrets should be reported immediately to an adult. They are asked to separate secrets into categories of *good* and *bad*, *keep* and *tell*. Without this understanding, young children are unable to determine if it is appropriate to report an incident.

Kohlberg (1984) described young children as being in the heteronomous stage of moral development. At this level, young children defer to the adults of authority in their lives and are obedient primarily because they want to avoid pun-

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ishment. Many programs advise young children to prevent abuse by saying "No" to the perpetrator and telling another adult what has happened. Although this concept is important, the sexual abuser is usually known to the child, is often a family member and is frequently a powerful person in the child's life. If young children are taught to disobey an adult, especially a significant adult, at certain times, they will find it difficult to act on this admonition. The young child perceives the social world as a place where powerful adults should be obeyed; consequently, the exceptions to that rule are difficult for them to comprehend.

Besides the doubtful effectiveness of prevention programs for young children, questions remain as to the negative impact such programs may have. Gilbert et al. (1989) reported that following a sexual abuse prevention program, preschoolers were more likely to associate negative affect with touches like bathing or tickling. Young children need to develop a sense of trust and a positive view of their own bodies and sexuality. Prevention programs for young children could have the unintended consequences of conveying a sense of mistrust and fear of adults and physical affection that would make it difficult for children to develop a secure view of the world.

Efforts to prevent sexual abuse of young children are essential. Prevention programs might prove more effective, however, when targeting significant adults in the young child's life. For example, parent education programs could be implemented early in an infant's life and continued throughout childhood. Teachers and caregivers can be trained to detect child abuse, become better observers of behavioral and physical symptoms, refine ways of communicating with suspected victims and learn methods of reporting offenses

(Koblinsky & Behana, 1984). It also appears more appropriate to direct prevention efforts toward school-age children who are more developmentally ready to grasp and apply abstract concepts.

Before any prevention program is implemented with young children, it should be carefully evaluated to ensure that the concepts are appropriate for children in the target group. Basic concepts must be identified and analyzed to determine if young children can comprehend their meaning and apply what they have learned to real situations in their lives. Additional research is needed to explore the effects of prevention programs on young children, looking for both positive and negative outcomes. Studies should also examine how adults can be trained effectively to assume more responsibility for the identification and prevention of young children's sexual abuse.

Young children, dependent on others in their lives, have limited capacities to protect themselves from those who would molest them. It would be a mistake to assume that programs will empower young children to protect themselves. Adults must maintain a strong presence in the protection of young children rather than assume that programs relieve them of that responsibility. We cannot expect young children to protect themselves from harm.

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