
No Turning Back: The School and Child Maltreatment

The school can help abused and neglected children by establishing policies, training staff, and ensuring administrator commitment.

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According to government statistics, more than a million children are maltreated in this country each year.¹ While medical and mental health professionals treat those who are physically abused, even more children are emotionally abused or neglected and are less likely to come to the attention of the authorities.

Dealing with any form of child maltreatment is often uncomfortable for educators, but for some children the school is the only protective mechanism. The school is the only social agency with a longitudinal perspective on families. This consistent observation of family history, change, stress, and crisis is the key to anticipating problems that may lead to child maltreatment.

Contributing Factors in Maltreatment

The problems that increase the potential for crisis in families prone to maltreatment confront all families in today's difficult economic times. Family pressure points are financial stress, unem-

ployment, under-education, youthful parenthood, and a home in which too many children were born too quickly.² The difference between maltreating families and others facing the same stressors is the ability to cope. Maltreating families seldom are able to learn from and adjust to crisis.

High-risk families often distort the roles of parent and child. These parents are hampered by a lack of child care and child development knowledge, and therefore have unrealistic expectations for their children. In a way, parent and child compete for the scarce physical and emotional resources available in their world.³

Families at risk for maltreatment are often isolated from sources of help and face alone their many internal relationship problems and the stress of getting along in the world. They turn to no one in times of crisis, so crisis becomes a way of life for them. Often they drift into maltreatment rather than explode into it in a fit of rage. Before that drift occurs, the school can help.

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How Schools Can Help

The role of the school in responding to maltreating families and their child-victims is built on a three-part foundation: policy, training, and administrative commitment.

Sound policy for cases of maltreatment means more than mission statements or promises to carry out duties mandated by statutes. Sound policy includes: (1) the mechanisms through which the school cooperates with the local child protection agencies, (2) a workable reporting procedure that protects the rights and responsibilities of all staff members, (3) staff to provide administrative support for the mandates of the policy, (4) documentation strategies, and (5) a clear sense of the responsibilities of all school personnel after reporting cases of maltreatment. These policy and procedural elements are one step toward the protection of children.

The second step in the school's response to child maltreatment is the establishment of a training program for all staff and the board. It is critical to remember that a training program that alerts the staff to signs of maltreatment is useful but less important than providing them with guidelines for what to do once maltreatment is recognized.

Building level personnel know the families in trouble. They know which parents are getting a divorce, who has a father in jail, a mother in the hospital, a father who lost his job. They know which students have been or are pregnant. These educators know the troubled child, the hard-to-handle child, the quiet and shy child who has no friends. Educators also know the parents who overreact, underreact, or demonstrate a lack of understanding of their child in a parent-teacher conference.

But identifying the families is easier than knowing how to help them. The most critical question is "What will the administration expect us to do?" If the answer is "nothing," that school district is not living up to the community's expectations and needs.

The third element of the school's response to child maltreatment is more elusive. It is an attitude of administrative commitment accompanied by consistent support when the staff makes efforts to provide protection for children under their care. This attitude must be expressed to the community, to all members of the staff, and to students and their families.

Protection Through Prevention

Schools have a special role to play in preventing child maltreatment. For example, in today's economy, with both parents working and the increase in single parent families, children are often left unsupervised between the end of the school day and the end of the work day. The "latch-key" child locked into or out of the house and the child alone or under the care of a brother or sister are all potential trouble situations. If the school district does not offer organized activities in the late afternoon or does not permit community agencies to conduct such programs, it fails to assume an important responsibility.

Another way schools can help prevent child maltreatment is by preparing young people for the pressures of parenthood. Today, 1,300,000 children live with adolescent mothers.⁴ At one time young people learned parenting techniques and child care by participating in the rearing of brothers and sisters. This is no longer the case, and adolescent mothers are at high risk for maltreating their children because they are unprepared to cope with parenthood.⁵

Schools can also provide a place in the district where parents can go when they feel overwhelmed by their children. The school psychology, home economics, or counseling departments can serve parents by teaching them about child development, parenting techniques, and discipline. The school can help break down parental isolation, fear, and resentment, all of which contribute to child maltreatment.

Creative and expanded uses of educational facilities and partnerships with other community agencies are the keys to prevention of maltreatment. Schools have the staff expertise to respond to the warning signals of families who find themselves in danger. To protect the children involved, schools need to provide the machinery to allow this expertise to function. □

¹U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Study Findings: National Study of the Incidence and Severity of Child Abuse and Neglect*. (Washington, D.C.: Office of Human Development Services Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, DHHS Publication No. (OHDS) 81-30325, September 1981).

²F. G. Bolton, Jr., *The Pregnant Adolescent: Problems of Premature Parenthood* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1980).

³F. G. Bolton, Jr., *Failed Families: Identification and Management of Potentially Violent Families* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1982), in review.

⁴Guttmacher Institute, *Teenage Pregnancy: The Problem That Hasn't Gone Away* (New York: The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1981).

⁵F. G. Bolton, Jr.; Kane, S. P.; and Laner, R. E. "Child Maltreatment Risk Among Adolescent Parents: A Study of Reported Cases," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 50, 3 (July 1980).

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