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CRIMINAL JUSTICE BOOK SUMMARIES

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Child Abuse & Neglect: A Guidebook for Educators and Community Leaders

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ACQUISITIONS

The authors of *Child Abuse and Neglect* emphasize that educators are often considered the "front line troops" in dealing with child abuse because they have regular contact with children outside the home. Yet the point is made that many schools have not accomplished as much as they could in the identification, prevention, and therapy of child maltreatment.

This book assists educators in developing a systematic approach to intervening in and preventing child abuse. It discusses the difficulty of defining abuse, the status of child abuse legislation, the characteristics and needs of abusers, and the particular situation of incest. School policies and post-reporting issues are addressed. This summary represents the authors' findings, views, and guidelines for dealing with this issue of child care.

Defining maltreatment

Public Law 93-247, passed in 1974, states that child abuse and neglect are

any physical or mental injury, sexual abuse, negligent treatment, or maltreatment of a child by a person who is responsible for the child's welfare. However, the law does not identify abuse specifically, leaving the interpretation to the courts, where it remains untested. State laws are also considered vague and untested.

In any case, communities deal primarily with the regulations and actions of enforcement agencies rather than with the laws themselves. Given the variety of definitions, it is not easy for educators to delineate their roles.

Incest is the most common form of sexual abuse. It generates a good deal of controversy and discussion regarding the incidence, the degree of harm done, and the effectiveness of human service programs designed to deal with the problem. Incestuous relationships vary considerably with regard to offenders, victims, and family interaction, but certain patterns are common. The most frequent incestuous relationship is between father and daughter or stepfather and

stepdaughter. Threats, guilt, deception, and the promise of rewards are used to ensure the child's cooperation. Incest suggests family discord, social isolation, and dysfunction.

Characteristics of parents who abuse and neglect their children

Parents who abuse their children may have been abused by their own parents, or may have been judged by health professionals to be socially or psychologically immature. They may be hurt by real or imagined criticism from children, see themselves as inadequate, experience exaggerated frustration at the child's perceived failure, and hold unrealistic behavioral expectations. They may violently act out their frustrations, abuse alcohol or drugs, or have violent marital problems.

Parents who neglect their children may be unable to tolerate stress, unable to express anger, or generally wish to have no responsibility for children.

School and protective services

A primary goal of school districts can be to develop a child protection policy that reflects State law and encourages school staff to actively carry out the spirit of the law. It is important to

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Child Abuse and Neglect: A Guidebook for Educators and Community Leaders, 2nd edition is available from Learning Publications, Inc., P.O. Box 1326, Holmes Beach, FL 33509

avoid unilateral action, and schools can establish an interdisciplinary network with the community and its social service personnel. Collaboration can take the form of ad hoc committees that write school policies to identify, report, prevent, and treat child abuse. These committees can remain active throughout the various phases of implementation to ensure that all participants have input in the policymaking phase while avoiding professional rivalries.

The superintendent of schools in his or her leadership role can organize the task force committees. Optimum size for a working group is five to eight persons. It is helpful to avoid forming committees dominated by any one professional area, such as medicine or social work.

The central school administration can also create a coordinating council composed of school and community professionals that can receive recommendations from the task force committees and assume responsibility for writing the systemwide policy.

A standard school district policy statement usually contains a rationale for school involvement, includes up-to-date community statistics, and emphasizes the school's responsibility to the "whole child," as well as the educational reasons for the program. The statement can provide local interpretation of regulations and statutes, clarify school personnel's reporting responsibilities, delineate the conditions that would justify reporting, provide guidelines for child abuse and neglect teams for each school, and conclude with a list of appropriate agencies that receive child abuse reports. (The authors provide a sample format for a child abuse and neglect policy statement.)

Identifying maltreatment

Children who have been abused or neglected exhibit a number of behavioral signs. Many, however, are behaviors that are exhibited by children who are not mistreated, and cautions should be used when educators attempt to draw a composite of behaviors exhibited by abused children. Typical signs include:

- being excessively disruptive, aggressive, or violent;

- contemptuously refusing to do schoolwork;
- destroying school property and stealing personal belongings;
- being extremely passive, withdrawn, or isolated;
- being fearful of authority;
- having a short attention span;
- being consistently tired and unable to stay awake;
- being bored when other children are stimulated;
- chronically staying home to care for siblings or parents, being truant without reason, or habitually tardy;
- consistently missing physical education or complaining that physical activity causes pain or discomfort.

Physical signs associated with maltreatment are:

- inappropriate dress for the weather;
- bruises, burns, welts, untreated sores, or infections;
- constant hunger or eating only junk food;
- untreated dental or medical problems;
- no proper immunization;
- dehydration or malnutrition;
- serious height or weight abnormalities.

It is best for educators to be very tentative in their judgments about child abuse until a trained expert can provide verified information on the child and parents. Parents who abuse their child commonly exhibit the following behaviors:

- ignoring their child's crying or reacting with extreme impatience, appearing cruel, sadistic, or lacking in remorse;
- indicating that the child is "bad" or different;
- appearing to be of borderline intelligence or generally irrational;
- showing or fearing loss of control;
- attributing injury to a third party;
- delaying medical treatment for the child;

- showing inappropriate detachment or overreaction;
- complaining about irrelevant problems;
- misusing drugs or alcohol;
- being reluctant to give information or refusing to consent to studies.

Clues to incest, however, are generally not revealed physically. Furthermore, sexually abused children may be protective of their families and withhold information. Common characteristics of sexually abused children are:

- frequent bacterial infection, genital rash, rectal bleeding, vaginal discharge or bleeding;
- phobias, hysteria, psychosomatic illness, suicidal tendencies;
- running away, truancy, substance abuse, fear of authority, deep-seated guilt;
- anxiety, being withdrawn;
- inability to establish positive peer relationships;
- confiding in others about sexual experiences, or generally showing sexual knowledge that is inappropriate for the age or circumstances.

The referral process

One person, preferably the principal, usually has primary responsibility for leading the school staff in matters of maltreated children. To be most effective the selected leader should be a competent, well-respected professional who has a working knowledge of the statutes, regulations, and reporting procedures at the Federal, State, and local levels. The leader's responsibility is to acquaint the staff with the school district's policy and the legal aspects of child abuse and neglect—what constitutes abuse and neglect, who is required to report, what types of maltreatment must be reported, what conditions warrant a report, the legal and professional consequences of not reporting, and what happens after the report is filed.

The school staff's responsibility is to identify and report, not investigate, cases of abuse and neglect. It is best for school staff to hesitate before acting alone to identify maltreatment. Preferably more than one member of

the staff will have identified signs of abuse; e.g., a teacher and nurse.

Relating to families

Once a problem has been identified and reported, the ways educators relate to parents who abuse or neglect their children becomes very important. Educators have an obligation to respect the rights of parents and children and not divulge private family information except under ethically proper circumstances.

Educators are most successful when they do not issue warnings to parents or place themselves in adversarial positions, and when they avoid criticizing the parents in front of the child or criticizing the child to the parents. Remaining objective about the child's living conditions and maintaining emotional self-control is important. Abusive parents need reassurance and the opportunity to feel good about themselves if they are to stop being abusive.

Educators can help to ensure that abused children and their peers do not sense that the abused child is being pitied or singled out for special assistance. Any special assistance can be a natural part of the curriculum.

The school environment can provide a supportive atmosphere that leaves treatment of the family to child protective services. Children who have been victims of maltreatment for years may have developed various ways of coping that educators may find troubling. The child may not be able to show gratitude to teachers or to any adult due to fear and lack of trust. The child's response to the educator's help may be less than what the educator expects.

The school and preventive services

The primary difference between protective and preventive services is that protective services are almost exclusively a court or State agency responsibility. Preventive services help families so that the community does not have to intervene.

Schools are not legally obligated to involve child protective service agencies in all their preventive efforts, but it makes good sense to have concerned public and private groups working together. In addition to protective services in the community, teachers may obtain assistance from school counselors, social workers, nurses, and psychologists who work with students and can help identify possible maltreatment.

Educational planning for prevention

One of the best ways schools can contribute to the prevention of child abuse is by initiating educational campaigns tailored to meet the unique needs of each school and community group. Schools have an overwhelming need to develop curriculum in sex education, human development, and family living. Such courses would have a major impact on reducing the likelihood that future parents will mistreat their children. Students might also receive training in parent-hood's practical aspects, such as child nutrition and changing diapers.

In the community, parent education could include some of these same areas, as well as techniques for preparing a child for school, for dealing with sex education in the home, and for disciplining children without using violence.

In-service programs—such as seminars and workshops—designed to enhance professional skills for educators and school volunteers are crucial to prevention efforts.

Among the most challenging prevention goals is the need to create awareness that a problem exists and that there are resources to deal with the problem. A public education campaign must make the community feel that it is affected by child maltreatment and that something can be done.

Programming for teenage parents

Teenage parents are often likely to find themselves in stressful parenting situations that can increase the risk that they will abuse or neglect their children.

Financial stress due to inadequate work skills, the instability of teenage marriages and the high divorce rate among teenagers, and a teenage mother's isolation from her peers, all contribute to a situation that can increase the risk that abuse will occur.

Schools can intervene and prevent these volatile situations by scrutinizing and modifying their policies and programming.

Expectant mothers have a legal right to be educated in a fashion comparable to that of other students. Parenting education can be instituted in the schools and can strive to increase the chances of a normal pregnancy and childbirth. It can help young school-age parents solve personal problems and help parents to continue their education before and after the birth.

To implement such a program, the schools can discreetly identify students who could benefit from the program and make them aware of the services the school can offer. The services may include separate but equal educational programs, transportation to and from school, and comprehensive health services, including nutrition counseling.

Teachers and counselors can develop expertise in dealing with young parents. The nurse usually has knowledge of prenatal and nutrition counseling and can encourage and maintain regular contact with teenage parents. A day-care facility at the school would permit the students to attend school and also provide the school staff with an opportunity to actively help new parents.

Conclusion

Schools are far from realizing their potential for reducing the incidence and effects of child abuse and neglect. Educators can, however, be very clear about how they can offer their services to the community and deal more effectively with child abuse and neglect. Educators can help the schools achieve their potential through intelligent planning and action in collaboration with the community.

Educators may find some helpful information in the book's appendixes, which include items that can be used to develop school policies and procedures:

- The text of P.L. 93-247, Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act.
- A sample school policy statement on child abuse and neglect from Denver, Colorado Public Schools.
- A sample report form.
- A flow chart of child protective services actions.
- A sample followup form for schools.
- An illustration of a school's response to a child abuse report.
- Sources of national and regional information.
- An annotated listing of films and inexpensive or free pamphlets.
- References and bibliography.

Other sources of information

American Association for Protecting Children: A Division of American Humane Association
9725 East Hampden
Denver, CO 80231
(303) 695-0811

Provides data and research analysis information on child abuse and neglect; acts as a clearinghouse for prevention programs; publishes a quarterly publication on child protection services.

Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Information

Jim Brantley
P.O. Box 1182
Washington, DC 20013
Provides publications; makes data base searches; provides referrals to other sources.

Further readings

Child Sexual Assault and Abuse: Guidelines for Schools. NCJ 95693. Edited by I.L. Davis. 45 pp. Availability: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 125 South Webster Street, P.O. Box 7841, Madison, WI 53707. Price: \$2.00, Bulletin #4360.

"Battered Child Syndrome: State v. Durfee." NCJ 95354. In 322 NW2d 778 (Minn 1982). *William Mitchell Law Review*. 10, no. 2 (1984) pp. 339-349.

Child Abuse Prevention Handbook. NCJ 94342. By the California Office of the Attorney General. 1982. 53 pp. Availability: California Office of the Attorney General, Crime Prevention Center, 555 Capitol Mall, Suite 290, Sacramento, CA 95814. Free single copy.

Connections Between Youth Problems and Violence in the Home. NCJ 80389. By P.W. Rhoades and S.L. Parker. 1981. 95 pp. Availability: Oregon Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, 2336 S.E. Belmont, Portland, OR 97214. NCJRS microfiche (free).

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Arranges for consulting; provides technical assistance and publications regarding child abuse, foster care, and parental kidnapping.