

Reflecting on Abuse and Neglect

This is a fictionalized account of actual events that occurred on a U.S. military installation. The names, exact dates, locations, and service-specific terminology have been changed or neutralized. To create the activities in this and subsequent lessons, we started with the facts of a real criminal investigation and lawsuit. What you will read here goes beyond the facts recorded in the criminal case by imagining details of individual's thoughts, feelings, and actions. Although much of what you will read here is fiction, the sequence of events and the tragic consequences are very real.

Learn more about the scenario that you read in Lesson 1. This time, look for the signs of abuse and neglect that you might notice in your program. Please note again, the details and sequence of these scenarios are fictionalized and expanded to demonstrate what you might see or hear in a program. For a more complete and accurate view of Bethany and Braden's Story, you may review the Explore exercises in the lessons for direct care staff. When you have finished reading Bethany and Braden's Story, answer the reflection questions.

Bethany and Braden's Story: Part 2

In the School-Age Program:

Max, a school-age staff member, ran his fingers through his hair and made eye contact with you as you walked through the program. You had several conversations with Max about Braden's behavior, but the behavior still seemed to get worse every day. Braden seemed to completely disconnect from the people around him. He would get very angry and begin destroying things. Max sighs and tells you, "I just caught Braden trying to pull the wings off of a dying fly. What is going on with that kid?" Bethany was just as bad. She seemed to have a vendetta against every adult in the building. If anyone tried to give her a direction, she snapped back with comments like, "Shut up" or "Go away." Sasha was the only staff member Bethany seemed to like, and today was her day off. Max looked exhausted, and the other staff members seemed to be on edge. After the last child left for the day, Max came to you visibly upset. He told you that he saw Caleb, the siblings' older foster-brother, twisting Braden's arm behind his back. At first, he just thought it was roughhousing but something didn't seem right. Braden actually looked scared. He got closer and heard Caleb say, "If you lie again, dad is going to burn your mouth so bad you won't talk for a week."

Several weeks later, Sasha called you from the program. She told you Bethany made a confession about the "obedience tests" to her (the school-age staff member). The obedience tests had become more and more sexual. Bethany was scared of Jonah and told Sasha she did not want to go home.

In the Community:

Neighbors always said the Millers were a great family. They were active in the community and attended all of the neighborhood events with their five children. They had a reputation for being strict, though. A school friend of Caleb's refused to go play at the Miller house. After Mrs. Miller offered a play date, you heard the boy tell his parents that he was scared of Mr. Miller and didn't want to get yelled at. He mentioned the rubber tubing that was placed in different places around the house. He told his parents that the children got hit with the tubing for not cleaning up fast enough. It happened one time while he was there. His parents asked a few more questions and made sure he wasn't hit. Then they explained that some people use spankings to discipline their children. From that point on, they always made sure their son invited Caleb over to their house to

play. They always looked for any signs that the children were mistreated, but they never felt that anyone was in danger.

As the months passed after Bethany and Braden's arrival, neighbors began to hear more shouting from the house. Sometimes it was Bethany screaming curses at the adults. Sometimes it was Mr. Miller raising his voice to the children. They all wanted to respect the Miller's privacy. You overheard neighbors and other families in the school-age program say things like, "It's got to be so hard to bring kids that age into the house" and "They're stronger than I am."

Reflection Questions:

What signs of abuse or neglect did staff members and neighbors notice?

There are many signs that the children were being abused. Unfortunately, it can be difficult for all the people who care about a child to put the pieces together. Here are signs that people noticed:

At the school-age program: Max and Sasha both saw and heard evidence that the children were being mistreated. Because the children were 9 and 11 years old, most of the evidence came from things the children said to staff members or other children. Max witnessed a physical interaction between Caleb and Braden. Bethany admitted her experiences to Sasha.

In the Community: The neighbors heard verbal signs of abuse. Extended crying, screaming, or other distress is a likely sign that a child is in danger.

Think about your role in your own program. What signs do you think you will be most likely to see in your role? Does the description of what the T&C at the program witnessed ring true?

Responses will vary, but you might expect that staff members will come to you with concerns. You might also witness interactions between children and families. You might work directly with families that need support around parenting or families that are experiencing stress. You might see events or hear conversations that make you suspect abuse or neglect. In some cases, you might have direct interactions with children that make you suspect abuse or neglect has occurred.

Think about the Miller's situation. What was going on in the family's life that might have caused stress? What should have triggered some supports for the family?

- *Two new foster children were introduced to the home.*
- *Bethany and Braden had multiple foster placements prior to the Millers. The instability in their lives might have caused them stress.*
- *Bethany and Braden might have used behavior that adults found challenging. Challenging behavior can increase stress in adults and make children more vulnerable to abuse and neglect.*
- *We do not know about the professional lives of Derrik and Melinda Miller. We know they are active-duty, so it is possible that they were experiencing job-related stress due to long or irregular hours, deployment, frequent moves, or other factors of military life.*

Think about the five protective factors. What supports might have helped the family around each of these factors?

Direct care staff members complete this same exercise in their lessons. It is important for you to think in more detail about how you can help create the supports the family might need. Provide more depth than is provided in the expert responses about what you could do at your community, on your installation, or in your program.

<p>Parental Resilience: This family was dealing with a great deal of stress. What community or installation resources might have helped?</p>	<p><i>Services from social workers or mental health professionals might have helped the family identify appropriate guidance and discipline strategies for their pre-teen children. Since the Millers also had a two-year-old, New Parent Support program should be one of the first referrals. Non-medical counseling or adoption support for military families (http://www.militaryonesource.mil/phases-family-life) also could have helped them work through short-term stressors.</i></p>
<p>Social Connections: As military service members stationed away from extended family and friends, what could have helped them build social connections?</p>	<p><i>This family was involved in their community. It might have been helpful for the family to make connections with other families of foster children who were experiencing similar challenges.</i></p>
<p>Concrete Support in Times of Need: What concrete supports did they need?</p>	<p><i>Concrete supports for anger management and discipline practices are needed. They also might need concrete supports like babysitters or respite from the demands of parenting.</i></p>
<p>Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development: How could the family have been prepared?</p>	<p><i>The Miller family might need information about what to expect from adolescent children in terms of behavior and social development. Such information might have prepared them to support Bethany and Braden rather than punish. They also could have used information about how to support relationship-building between their biological children and foster children. They created a situation in which the biological children dominated and assaulted the foster children.</i></p>
<p>Social and Emotional Competence of Children: Bethany and Braden's behavior was some indication that they needed support around social and emotional competence. What might have helped them?</p>	<p><i>Bethany and Braden might benefit from support around the emotional events they have experienced throughout their lifetimes. They need professional help to process the experiences they have had in foster homes since toddlerhood. They may be dealing with feelings of abandonment and insecurity.</i></p> <p><i>They also need support around building their own social connections. If they have moved around a lot, they may be</i></p>

hesitant to make new friends. They might assume that they will be moving to a new foster home soon, anyway. They need adults to help them learn to identify and express their emotions appropriately. They also could benefit from programs that help them interact appropriately with peers and adults.