

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.

Read these expanded scenarios in which individuals suspected the Miller children were being abused. Be sure to notice the additional information about what the adults in each situation did. Then answer the reflection questions.

Bethany and Braden's Story: Part 3

In the School-Age Program:

Max, a school-age staff member, ran his fingers through his hair and tried to think of what to do next. Braden's behavior just 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. This afternoon he had caught Braden trying to pull the wings off of a dying fly. Bethany was just as bad. She seemed to have a vendetta against every adult in the building. If you 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 was exhausted. He looked over and 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. As he got closer he heard Caleb say, "If you lie again, dad is going to burn your mouth so bad you won't talk for a week."

Max stepped in and separated the boys. "What's the problem here?" he asked. Caleb replied, "There's not a problem. He's just a little liar." Braden slumped down onto the chair. "I am not," he said under his breath. Max thought quickly. This didn't seem like conflict or a time for mediation. Caleb definitely seemed to be exerting power over Braden, and Braden seemed afraid. He calmed both boys down and sat with Braden in a spot where they could talk quietly. "You seemed pretty upset back there. Is everything OK?" Max asked. Braden just shrugged his shoulders. He didn't say a word. Max stayed with him for a few minutes and then went to talk to Caleb. Caleb was playing on the computer, but he stopped when Max approached. "Whatever that little punk told you isn't true," he instantly began. "I hope he gets sent back wherever he came from. My mom says he is evil and that we have to train him before he ruins our family."

Max was concerned enough about what he saw to talk to his manager. Together they decided they had seen a pattern of behavior that raised a reasonable suspicion about what was going on in the Miller house.

Bethany only had one friend in the school-age program. A girl named Felicity rode the bus with Bethany, and they went to the same church. Felicity would often sit by Bethany when she was having a bad day or had gotten into an argument with another child. After a particularly bad night of "obedience tests" from Jonah, Bethany confided in her friend as they huddled together on a picnic

table outside. Bethany told Felicity that she was so tired. She showed Felicity the marks on her back from the whippings she got when she failed the “tests.” She wouldn’t tell Felicity what the tests were, but Felicity could tell from her friend’s face that she was scared.

That night Felicity told her mom what Bethany had told her. Felicity’s mom called the Millers. She thought they should know what Jonah was doing. Melinda Miller thanked Felicity’s mom for calling and for caring about her family. She assured Felicity’s mom that they would take care of everything. She and Felicity’s mom talked for several more minutes about the challenges of raising pre-teens. Bethany wasn’t in school the next day or for several days after. She stopped talking to Felicity and avoided her at the school-age program.

Several weeks later, Bethany made a similar confession about the “obedience tests” to Sasha (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.

Bethany begged Sasha not to tell anyone. She said she had been beaten really badly the last time she told someone, and she couldn’t go to school for a week while she healed. “I don’t know what’ll happen if you tell,” she cried to Sasha. Sasha hugged the girl and felt like crying herself. She knew she had to tell, though. “Bethany, I’m worried about you and it’s my job to help,” she said. “I’ve got to call people who know what to do.” Bethany continued to cry, but Sasha contacted her manager and made a call to FAP right away.

What would you recommend Max and Sasha do? What would you do?

You should recommend that they make reports. As mandated reporters, they clearly have a reasonable suspicion of abuse. The fact alone that they talked to you and the manager about their concerns is a sign that there is a reasonable suspicion.

You should make sure Max and Sasha report the suspicion. You and the manager also now have a reasonable suspicion that abuse has occurred in your program, and you are also mandated reporters. If a staff member does not make the report, you have a legal responsibility to do so. The staff member should make the report since he or she has the first-hand information, but you and the manager are also mandated reporters. You must make sure that a report gets made.

How would you support Max and Sasha before, during, and after a report?

Help them summarize and record the information they have observed. Help them locate the reporting procedures for your building. If requested, you can stay with the staff member while he or she makes the call. After the report, provide an opportunity to reflect on the emotional experience the staff member just had. Make sure they know they might not hear back about the results of the report, but they did the right thing. Also help them understand your program’s guidelines for interacting with families after the report. Furthermore, you must make sure staff members respect the family’s privacy. It is unprofessional and inappropriate for Max and Sasha to discuss their observations or suspicions with anyone other than a supervisor or FAP. Set clear guidelines about how and when to discuss the situation: who has a “need to know”?

Imagine Mr. and Mrs. Miller learned about the report and were very upset. Mr. Miller comes to the front office and confronts you and the manager. He says the allegations were completely unfounded and unprofessional. He says the program staff should be fired. He says they are irresponsible and just spreading gossip and lies about his family. He threatens to sue the program for defaming his character. He says his civil liberties to raise his children in the way he sees fit are being threatened. He threatens to withdraw his children from the program and go to the news media.

How would you support the program staff now that the family is publicly upset?

Make sure the staff members know they did the right thing. Stand behind all of your staff members, and protect them from any of the aftermath of a report. Help them reflect on what they observed and what they did. Also make sure they understand that the family is under a great deal of stress as a result of the investigation. The family might not provide you with complete and accurate information about the investigation (and they are not required to provide you with any information). No matter what the family says, the staff members did the right thing. Reinforce that any reasonable suspicion must be reported. It is not their job to investigate.

You and the management team must also realize that an allegation of child abuse or neglect is a serious event for families. It is likely that they will be angry and perhaps take their emotions out on the program or staff members that they think made the report. You must work together and be prepared to handle families' responses to the allegation.