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Mandated Reporters Need Training on Context, Critical Thinking

By Benjamin H. Levi, MD PhD

Around the country, child welfare systems large and small have built a front door to child protection that relies heavily on information provided to the state from the public, especially from “mandated reporters” such as school officials, doctors and police officers.

But in most states, we are not doing nearly enough to help shape an informed approach to the situation by these reporters. And this has jeopardized our ability to run a fair and trusted approach to child safety.

When we think about protecting children from abuse, it’s often framed in terms of safeguarding them from bad people. Sometimes, that is exactly right. There are people who set out to harm or exploit children. But we also know that most child maltreatment happens within families and close relationships, not at the hands of a stranger. There are many factors that contribute to a child being abused, but chief among them is increased stress in the life of a caregiver – which may result from economic insecurity, physical or mental illness, substance use, intimate partner violence, or systemic bias due to one’s race/ethnicity or sexual identity. mandated reporters Dr. Benjamin Levi, Penn State.

Mandated reporter trainings are typically designed to prepare those who work or volunteer with children to identify and report suspected child abuse – by explaining legal definitions, reporting requirements, and signs and symptoms of abuse. But despite the serious implications associated with reports of suspected abuse, shockingly few of these trainings have been formally tested for their efficacy. A recent study of online mandated reporting programs found that only 10 state trainings had both a pre- and post-test process to assess what users had learned (search under “Training Features” in this map).

Equally, if not more troubling, few trainings take a broader view. Such a view would move us away from surveilling families with a “when in doubt make a report” approach, and toward supportive action and empathy. It is important to help people, especially mandated reporters, think more critically about what they see, and how they interpret it; when to be concerned, and when (and how) to take action to safeguard children and support families.

There is a profound difference between poverty and neglect, and between abuse and parenting that is not what the observer thinks is ideal. Rarely are mandated reporters being trained to be on the lookout for children in a way that explores a broader concept of well-being, and understands the complex and compounding impact of economic inequities, cross-generational trauma and systemic racism.

In a world filled with uncertainty it can be hard to know what the right thing to do is. This is particularly challenging with child abuse because the stakes are so high. Fail to act when we should, and we risk leaving a child in harm’s way. But reporting a child to an abuse hotline when it’s not warranted risks subjecting families to under-resourced state agencies and imperfect systems of investigation that can disrupt and sometimes devastate families. This complicated equation is all the more vexing because conscious and unconscious biases influence what counts as child maltreatment, and who (or what) we think is to blame.

Every year, about 7 million children are reported for suspected abuse in the U.S. More than 1 in 3 children get “screened-in” for assessment by child protection agencies before they turn 18, a frequency that rises to over 50% for Black and indigenous children. Families of color are also significantly more likely than white families to have their children removed and placed in foster care.

As a society, we are starting to look more critically at our biases, how our institutions and systems of “support” are structured, and how that structure discriminates against and/or antagonizes people of color. Interventions aimed at preparing people to be on the lookout for child abuse need to anticipate these biases and their impact on children and their families – particularly those families hanging on by a thread.

One need only recall the history of Native American boarding schools, or look to many current policies regarding domestic violence to appreciate why there are calls to entirely abolish the child welfare system.

But despite its many flaws, it remains the only true system we have for protecting vulnerable children. So until we have a better system, we desperately need interventions that interrupt implicit bias by promoting critical thinking, and thereby

minimize disproportional responses within child welfare. Such an approach has been developed by Penn State's Center for the Protection of Children, whose evidence-based, online *iLookOut* learning program uses an interactive, video-based storyline to help mandated reporters think more critically about the consequences of both acting and not acting.

The famous essayist H.L. Mencken once said that "for every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong." Such is the case with abuse and neglect reporting – there is nothing clear and simple about a process with such high stakes for children and parents.

How to protect children from abuse without causing significant collateral damage is a challenge that doesn't have an easy answer. But given its enormous cost to children and their families, and to society at large, it is not a problem we should ignore. We need better ways to help people become more informed, critical thinkers who are prepared to protect children while also supporting families. This is a complex problem that belongs to us all.

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