

Suspecting Child Abuse or Neglect in the Home

No one ever wants to suspect child abuse or neglect. There are times, though, when you must follow your instincts. If you suspect abuse or neglect, your call can save a life. Read the following scenarios and answer the questions.

Scenario 1:

Clark walks in to pick up his son, Dakota, from your classroom. "Dakota, get your fat, lazy butt in gear. Your brother's got a soccer game tonight. We need to get moving." As he shuffles him out the door, you hear him say again, "Could you get any slower? Man, if I were as lazy as you, my dad would have beat the lazy out of me."

What evidence makes you suspect child abuse or neglect?

Clark uses very negative language towards his son. He belittles him. He calls him names. He describes Dakota as lazy. He seems to threaten beating Dakota. At the very least, it sounds like Clark has a history of receiving beatings as a child.

What steps would you take to respond to this situation?

Write down exactly what you heard and said. Write down the time and date. If you see a pattern of abusive or hurtful language, you should make a report. If the behavior seems to escalate and you feel that Dakota is at risk for harm, make a report immediately. If the behavior becomes physical (Clark grabs, shoves, or hits Dakota), make a report immediately.

Scenario 2:

The phone rings endlessly when you call Pablo's house. He hasn't been at your program for the past 3 weeks, and you have not been able to contact his mom. Your supervisor is asking whether Pablo's family has moved or withdrawn from the program. As you are about to hang up, Pablo and his mother walk in. You are very surprised to see Pablo's 3rd grade sister with them. School started hours ago. When you ask Pablo's mom where they have been and if everything is alright, she just shrugs. You ask Pablo's sister how school is going. She just says, "Ok," and looks at her mom. You suspect this girl has not been in school for weeks.

What evidence makes you suspect child abuse or neglect?

There is no explanation for Pablo's absence. It also seems that Pablo's sister has not been attending school. Allowing a child to miss school for long periods of time without an explanation can be considered neglect.

What steps would you take to respond to this situation?

It is important to learn more about this situation. Do your best to talk to Pablo's mother. Make a referral to community agencies or your Military Family Advocacy Program. If you see any other signs of abuse after an absence (fading bruises, burns or cuts in various stages of healing), make a report immediately.

Scenario 3:

Cheyenne's mom, Brandi, has just returned from a lengthy deployment. She was injured in the line of duty and has not been able to return to work. Cheyenne lived with her grandma during the deployment, but she has now returned back to live with Brandi. Since Brandi's homecoming, Cheyenne's attendance at your program has decreased. When Brandi does drop Cheyenne off at school, Brandi seems detached and rarely says more than a word or two to you. Brandi does not offer Cheyenne any goodbye hugs or kisses; she simply walks out of the classroom. You have also noticed that Cheyenne is coming to school very dirty and very hungry. This was not the case before Brandi's deployment.

What evidence makes you suspect child abuse or neglect?

Brandi's behavior has changed since returning from deployment. She does not seem interested or connected to her daughter. Cheyenne does not seem to be taking baths or eating enough food at home. The stress related to deployment, injury, and reintegration puts Brandi at higher risk for child abuse or neglect. It is possible that she is experiencing depression and isolation.

What steps would you take to respond to this situation?

Record your observations and make a report immediately if you see a pattern of behavior that indicates neglect. In the meantime, talk to your supervisor about the resources available in your community to help Brandi adjust to life as a single mom after deployment. Encourage Brandi to contact a Military Family Advocacy Program for support.