Suspecting Child Abuse Inside a Child Development Program

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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:
“Tyrone, you know this song. I want to hear you singing it right now,” Cassidy barks over the sound of the CD playing in her classroom. Tyrone continues to look at his feet and play with the Velcro on his shoes. “Tyrone. Stand up. Get up here.” Cassidy pulls Tyrone to his feet, grabs him by the arm, and jerks him to the front of the carpet. “Sing so we can hear you.” Tyrone looks shy and scared. He starts to move his mouth. “You are being disrespectful. Go sit at the table. Now. Put your head down.” She pushes him toward the table.

Is Cassidy’s behavior appropriate? Why or why not?

No, Cassidy’s behavior is not appropriate. This behavior definitely makes us suspect that Cassidy is capable of emotional and physical abuse. She has unrealistic expectations for Tyrone’s behavior. She excludes him from the group, and she physically moves him from place to place.

What steps would you take to respond to this situation?

Immediately make a report to your supervisor [or DoD hotline]. Cassidy’s behavior is harmful. It must be addressed. If you feel safe, you can have a conversation with Cassidy. Protecting a child is worth risking your relationship with your co-worker. You could say, “Cassidy, music time did not feel safe yesterday. I’m worried about your relationship with Tyrone. It seemed like you got really frustrated. Can we talk about ways to work with him?”

Scenario 2:
Your relationship with Tish, your co-teacher has been rocky since the beginning. She does not always show up to work when she is scheduled, and she calls in sick more often that you would like. Today she has seemed really distracted. She knows she is not supposed to have her cell phone out, but she has checked it at least ten times this morning. You’ve asked her if everything is ok, but she just nods and keeps to herself. On the playground, she looks at her phone one more time and goes back inside without a word. You are now alone with 18 children on the playground. While you are summoning help, you see a scuffle in the play house area. A new three-year-old has bitten a playmate. Children are throwing rocks to get her to stop.

Is Tish’s behavior an example of neglect? Why or why not?

Yes, Tish’s inaction has put children at risk. She is not providing any supervision or appropriate care to the children. She left you out of ratio, and children are getting injured.
What steps would you take to respond to this situation?

Immediately call for help. Do your best to keep children safe. Go to the three-year-old. Use guidance strategies to stop the biting and rock throwing. Comfort the victim and apply first aid as needed. Report the situation to your supervisor [and the DoD hotline].

Scenario 3:
Inez has been acting strangely lately. She panics every time her mom drops her off in the morning. Lately, her mother has had to carry her in screaming. Inez’s mom is so upset. She clearly has to fight back her own tears as she leaves. You can’t quite remember when Inez’s behavior started, but you know that it has gotten worse. Inez’s mom shakes her head as she holds her and looks at you for help. She tells you, “She starts screaming as soon as the Child Development Center is in sight. Last night we drove by on our way to dinner, and she sobbed and screamed. I don’t know what is going on.” You reach out your arms and ask Inez if you can help her say goodbye to mom. She willingly comes to you. Just then, a staff member brings in breakfast. You feel Inez’s entire body go tense in your arms. She buries her head in your shoulder as if she is trying to disappear. You remember your field trip to the nature preserve two weeks ago. That staff member had been with your class the whole time. You vaguely remember the chaos of getting the children’s hands washed and using the restroom before lunch. Is it possible that staff member had been alone with Inez? What could have happened?

What evidence makes you suspect child abuse or neglect?

Inez’s behavior has changed. She seems frightened of school and of a particular staff member.

What steps would you take to respond to this situation?

Write down all of the evidence. Immediately report your suspicions. Be prepared to refer Inez’s family to counseling and support groups.

Scenario 4:
It is Taylor’s fifth birthday today. She is an energetic and passionate child. She is a leader in the classroom, but unfortunately she usually uses her leadership skills to get other children in trouble. You know she pushes your buttons sometimes, but today she really seems to be bothering your co-teacher, Melinda. Taylor won’t stop talking about tonight’s birthday party and cupcakes. It has been the only topic of conversation today because some children were invited and others weren’t. Taylor does not seem at all interested in her lunch. When Melinda reminded Taylor to eat her food for the third time, Taylor stuck her tongue out and said, “You’re not the boss of me. My mom says I’m a princess and I don’t have to eat your gross food if I don’t want to.” You see Melinda’s face turn red. Melinda snatches Taylor’s plate away and walks to the trash can. “Fine. If you don’t want to eat, you can go hungry.” Taylor begins to cry, “I want that back. I’ll finish my burger.” Melinda responds, “No. You made your choice,” and throws away the food.

Is Melinda’s behavior appropriate? Why or why not?

No, withholding food could be considered abusive. It is an inappropriate discipline strategy for child development programs.
What steps would you take to respond to this situation?

You must intervene. Taylor must have the opportunity to eat lunch. Protecting a child is worth risking your relationship with your co-worker. Say, “Taylor, I know it’s your birthday and you are excited. It’s not ok to be disrespectful to Ms. Melinda, though. I will make sure you have a lunch. Once we eat and calm down, we can all talk about it again.”

Scenario 5:
Ruby is serving breakfast to a small group of preschoolers. Jasmine arrives to drop off her twin daughters, Julia and Josey. Ruby smiles warmly and calls across the room, “Good morning, Twin and Other Twin. How are you two doing today?” Jasmine replies, “They’re good” and helps them put their coats in their cubbies. Ruby says with a laugh, “I don’t know how you can tell those girls apart. I just call them twin and other twin ‘cause there is no hope for me.” Jasmine just nods, clearly at a loss for words. She kisses her girls goodbye and leaves the room.

Is Ruby’s behavior appropriate? Why or why not?

No, this behavior is not appropriate. This behavior makes us suspect that Ruby is, at the least, being insensitive to two children in her classroom. Ruby is not taking an interest in the children in her care. She has not made the effort to even learn their names or build a relationship with them. She has also made it clear that she does not plan to make that effort. This can have a long term impact on the girls and their experiences in the child development program.

What steps would you take to respond to this situation?

Talk about the situation with your supervisor or trainer. Ruby needs to learn sensitivity and the importance of reaching out to all children and families. Make a point of learning the girls’ names. Talk about your concerns with Ruby.