

## What If . . .

### Suspecting Child Abuse in a Child Development Program

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:**

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 than 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 an accident on the basketball court. A child appears to be injured.

#### **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. Comfort injured children and apply first aid as needed. Report the situation to your supervisor [and the DoD hotline].*

#### **Scenario 2:**

Patrick is 19 years old and has recently joined the staff at your school age program. He seems to spend a lot of time in the "lounge" area of your program playing video games and hanging out on couches with the kids. Several of the preteen girls seem to seek out his company. When you look over towards the lounge area today, you see several 12 year old girls tickling him and trying to sit on his lap. He looks uncomfortable, but he is playing along.

#### **Is Patrick's behavior appropriate? What behaviors need addressed?**

*No, Patrick's behavior is not appropriate. At the most basic level, he is focusing his supervision on only one part of the program. His help and attention is most likely needed in other areas. The biggest problem, however, is allowing or encouraging girls to sit on his lap. He is an authority figure and any potentially sexual contact with children is inappropriate—regardless of who initiates the contact.*

#### **What steps would you take to respond to this situation?**

*Talk to Patrick right away, make sure he and the girl separate, and notify your supervisor of what you saw. Patrick must be made aware that it is not ok to have physical/ affectionate contact with children. He should review your program's touch policy with a supervisor.*

### **Scenario 3:**

It is Taylor's eighth birthday today. She is an energetic and passionate child. She is a leader in the program, 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 fellow staff member, 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. When Melinda hears Taylor tell a girl, "You're not invited to my party because you're too fat," Melinda's face turns red. Melinda grabs Taylor roughly by the arm and pulls her away from the other girl. She gets in Taylor's face and says, "Listen, you rude little b\*tch..."

#### **What behaviors are problematic?**

*Melinda's behavior makes us suspect she might be capable of emotional or physical abuse. At the very least, she uses inappropriate and harsh guidance practices. It is never ok to grab a child forcefully. It is also never ok to call a child a curse word and speak disrespectfully to a child.*

#### **What steps would you take to respond to this situation?**

*You must intervene to ensure Taylor's safety. Step in immediately to separate Melinda and Taylor. Protecting a child is worth risking your relationship with your co-worker. Say, "Taylor, I know you are excited about your birthday, but it is not ok to be disrespectful to anyone. That's true for adults, too. Melinda, I think you should go take a break in the office." Report what you saw. Notify your supervisor immediately and describe what you saw. Melinda's parents will also need notified about this event and your program's response.*

### **Scenario 4:**

Reggie has been a coach for the competitive youth football team for years. He is a pillar of the community. Many of the boys from your program go to practices with Reggie in the afternoons. Today you and a male co-worker are picking the boys up from practice and bringing them to your program. Most of the boys are ready, but Marcus is still in the locker room. Because you are the only male staff member, you are sent into the locker room to check on Marcus. You find Reggie and Marcus in the First Aid station. Marcus' pants and underwear are off. When Reggie sees you he explains that Marcus pulled a hamstring, and he was examining it. Marcus avoids eye contact with you.

#### **What behaviors make you suspect abuse?**

*There is no logical reason for Marcus to be completely naked and alone with Reggie. Reggie's explanation does not match the scenario that you encountered. Marcus' behavior also indicates that something inappropriate occurred.*

#### **What steps would you take to respond to this situation?**

*File a report of your suspicions of child sexual abuse immediately. Inform your supervisor of the report as well.*