



Mandatory Reporting and Keeping Youth Safe

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012), in 2011, 16% of high school students had considered attempting suicide in the past year, and 8% of high school students had attempted suicide in the past year. These rates increased from 14% of teens who considered suicide and 6% of teens who attempted suicide in 2009 (CDC, 2010). In 2011, 9% of students experienced being hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by a boyfriend or girlfriend. This rate is similar to the rate in 2009 (CDC, 2010). It is critical for frontline staff to understand laws regarding mandatory reporting and proper reporting protocol, including who is responsible for reporting suspected child abuse or neglect, imminent harm, sexual coercion, or statutory rape. This tip sheet provides practical guidance for frontline staff who may encounter these types of situations when delivering teen pregnancy prevention programming.

RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS

The following approaches will ensure that project staff are able to recognize signs of suspected child abuse or neglect, imminent harm, sexual coercion, or statutory rape:

- **Train all levels of staff** to identify verbal and non-verbal behaviors that are signs of abuse or harm to self or others. It is especially important for staff to recognize extreme or bizarre behavior as a potential sign of abuse rather than to mislabel such behavior as simply “acting up.”
- **Seek out resources** that identify signs and symptoms of violence, neglect, or imbalance in power in relationships.
- **Take disclosures seriously**, including disclosures of suicidal thoughts, bullying, intentions to harm others, dating violence, abuse by a caretaker, or neglect.

DETERMINING WHETHER REPORTING IS MANDATED

Learn about reporting requirements in your state. Each state has laws covering mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse and neglect. A list of state reporting requirements can be found at https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp.cfm?rs_id=5&rate_chno=W-00082. Tribal jurisdictions follow specific requirements as well. Staff working with teens may be required to report other types of behaviors, such as imminent harm to self or others (including intimate teen partner violence or bullying) and statutory rape.

- **Identify who is required to report.** Most states specifically make reporting mandatory for professionals such as social workers, medical and mental health professionals, teachers, and child care providers. However, many states also require other professionals who may have frequent contact with children to report, and specific agencies may have policies with additional requirements.
- **Learn what types of situations or incidents must be reported** and to whom reports must be made.
- **Develop clear policies and emergency contact lists for frontline staff**, including the specific supervisor to contact before making a report to authorities.

- **Develop a checklist of information for staff** in case a mandatory reporting situation occurs. The checklist should include
 - local numbers for child protective services and law enforcement;
 - national child abuse hotlines, such as the Childhelp National Abuse Hotline (1-800-422-4453 or <http://www.childhelp.org>); and
 - school or agency reporting policy and procedures, including personnel (school counselors or social workers) who can support staff and youth.
- **Establish protocols about notifying caregivers**, including whether and when they should be notified and by whom. Share these protocols among all staff and regularly review them.
- **Create a sample reporting form** that provides the basic information needed to make a report. The form may include:
 - the type of maltreatment to report (e.g., physical or sexual abuse);
 - a reminder that the reporter must have only a *reasonable suspicion* that someone is in danger rather than hard evidence (the case will be investigated by law enforcement and/or child welfare services);
 - the process to report either by phone (including reporting hotline and other important contact information) or in a written report; and
 - the consequences for not reporting or following established reporting procedures.
- **Train all levels of staff** on your organization’s procedures and your state’s mandatory reporting laws. Frontline staff should first document the incident and report to their supervisor. Supervisors must be aware of reporting requirements and ensure that reports are made in a timely manner to the appropriate authorities.
- **Get to know the staff in your local child protective service unit** to gain a better understanding of how your local program is structured and to develop relationships and rapport before emergencies occur.
- **Inform youth about the limitations of confidentiality.** Youth (and parents if you are working with them) need to know at the beginning of project activities that staff are mandated to report when they suspect that someone is in danger.
- **Develop a list of mental health resources** to provide youth with information about who they can talk to.

REPORTING ABUSE

The following tips may be helpful as you train staff in reporting requirements and procedures:

- **Remain calm and get help.** If necessary, take the youth to a designated mental health professional or supervisor. Do not leave a distressed youth unsupervised.
- **Avoid probing for details** of the situation or incident, investigating, or discussing the situation with anyone not directly involved in helping support the teen, including their parents, before discussing with your supervisor.
- **Immediately contact your supervisor** or a designated, trained professional. The frontline staff with direct knowledge and their supervisor should place a joint call to authorities so that complete, accurate information is conveyed.
- **Call 911 or other appropriate authorities** if you are concerned about immediate safety and a supervisor or designated, trained medical or mental health professional is unavailable.
- **Call the local Law Enforcement Agency and request a police welfare check.** A police welfare check is a law enforcement function performed with significant regularity. A welfare check occurs when a report is made to law enforcement about an individual who may be in some sort of peril, usually in that person’s residence. Here, law enforcement officers possess authority to enter the residence to determine the safety of the individual.
- **Refer youth to appropriate community resources.** It is important for staff to be able to refer youth to appropriate community resources, including domestic violence programs, rape crisis centers, or the National Dating Abuse Helpline. The following are some helpful resources:

- Recognize signs of abuse:
http://www.helpguide.org/mental/child_abuse_physical_emotional_sexual_neglect.htm
- If you or someone you know has experienced intimate partner violence, free and confidential help is available 24 hours a day through the National Dating Abuse Helpline:
 - Call 1-866-331-9474 or TTY 1-866-331-8453.
 - Seek online support at www.loveisrespect.org through the live chat feature.
 - Text “loveis” directly to 77054 to begin a text chat with an advocate.
- **Write an incident report immediately**, including information about exactly what was said or observed, who was notified and when, and how the situation ended at the time of reporting.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

- Break the Cycle & the National Dating Abuse Helpline. (n.d.). *If you don't want to, you don't have to: Info about sexual coercion*. Available at <http://www.loveisrespect.org/if-you-dont-want-to-you-dont-have-to-sexual-coercion>
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