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Protecting God's Children for Adults



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The Consequences of Failing to Report Child Maltreatment: The Impact on All of Us

By [Judge Kate Huffman](#)

Introduction

We never know when we may be called upon to report



suspected abuse that could potentially save the life of a child. Whether you are a mandated reporter by your state or organization, we are all ethical and moral reporters. Failing to report suspected abuse have tremendous consequences for not only the child, but also for teachers, principals, school administrators and staff, coaches, volunteers and the clergy—and other children. Rightfully so, abuse within any organization, including the Church, has sparked anger from the public toward both the offenders and the institution—for the failure to not only recognize the signs of abuse, but also for the failure to take action and report it.¹

Examples of adults failing to report

Consider the following actual situations.

- At one school this past year, ten employees were fired for sexually abusing, grooming, or having inappropriate sexual relationships with students—including staff who knew about the abuse (or

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Judge Kate Huffman

Judge Huffman has been a General Division Judge since 2002 and served as the elected Administrative Judge of the General Division from January, 2016 through December, 2018. She received her B.A. in political science from Wright State University and

suspected that it was happening, yet failed to report to civil authorities.²

- In another instance, a teacher was sentenced to probation for failure to report disclosures of sexual abuse communicated to him by students. The students told the teacher they had been sexually assaulted by a teacher's aide assigned to the classroom. The teacher told investigators that he believed the students were lying and described the teacher's aide as a "model instructor." Following a police investigation, the teacher's aide was sentenced to ten years in prison for sexually abusing ten students at the school.³
- In another situation, an elementary school principal was convicted of failing to report suspected sexual abuse to the authorities after a child disclosed "vivid and explicit details" about what a teacher had done to her. Instead, the principal conducted her own investigation because she believed the alleged offender was innocent and "forthright" and that the student must have been lying.⁴ Other students later came forward and alleged the same teacher had sexually abused them also—including one student who was abused by the teacher weeks *after* the principal failed to report the first allegation.⁵

Child Disclosure

A child's disclosure of abuse is a critical component of protecting children—and must always receive appropriate care and intervention by adults.⁶ In the United States, the sexual abuse of children represents a significantly underreported crime.⁷ Rates of reporting remain particularly low for sexual abuse by an individual known to the victim.⁸ Because of the manipulation and grooming done to them, among other factors, many victims/survivors of sexual abuse do not disclose sexual abuse, or delay disclosure for years.⁹ Victims of sexual abuse may not disclose or report the offense for many reasons, including:

- fear of retaliation or additional victimization from the offender,
- worry that they will not be believed,
- lack of confidence in official response,
- shame,
- embarrassment and
- self-blame for the abuse.¹⁰

Conversely, social support—from parents, caregivers and other influential adults can help facilitate a child's disclosure of sexual abuse, and also aid in a child's journey to healing.¹¹ The response by those to whom a

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child discloses functions as a critical component of recovery.¹² Reporting our suspicions of abuse, and disclosures of children, is part of providing that social support to children—but we often don't act in ways that best protect youth, and can willfully fail to report or behave with rationalized avoidance.

Failure to report suspected abuse

The decision to either ignore indicators of abuse or child disclosures, refusal to explore further concerning statements, and failure or refusal to report suspected or alleged abuse results in cascading effects for both the person who has the ability or responsibility to report and the victim/survivor. The duty to report suspected child abuse is the ethically responsible action to take, and, it is a requirement for people who are mandatory reporters. The failure to report is not only an affront to one's own character and integrity, but it can also result in civil and criminal penalties, as well as other administrative consequences (including termination of employment or loss of professional licensure). However, the more fundamental and devastating consequences of failing to report suspected abuse are the harm to the victim/survivor, which can result in both immediate and long-term consequences.

We should all be reporting to local authorities for any *suspected* sexual, emotional/psychological or physical abuse, or neglect. While easy to view in hindsight after confirmation of abuse, children's behavioral indicators of abuse often remain missed or ignored. Remember, other than physical abuse, child abuse rarely results in physical manifestations of the maltreatment. Child abuse also often occurs outside the presence of witnesses—with offenders often acting to avoid disclosure or to neutralize suspicion through grooming behaviors in plain sight.¹³ Offenders work to discredit their victims and act intentionally to bolster their own credibility—while undermining victims in the eyes of other adults.

State and federal laws determine who must report suspected abuse. Some states indicate that every adult is a mandated reporter. Mandatory reporting laws require *immediate* reporting upon a reasonable suspicion of abuse. The reasonable suspicion standard—what would a reasonable person think given the situation—removes any personal biases from the reporting requirement. In other words, an adult's incredulity about the child's disclosure, or favorable opinion about the suspected or reported offender finds no place in the duty to report. Instead, if the thought has entered your mind that you think a child might be being, or has been, abused—immediately make a report to the authorities by contacting Child Protective Services or local law

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enforcement. Governmental authorities bear the responsibility of investigating and assessing credibility—*your* responsibility lies in reporting.

Lack of reporting results from two primary situations—either the failure to recognize the signs of abuse or a conscious decision not to report suspected abuse. Several surveys estimate school personnel report less than 30% of known and suspected child abuse and neglect cases.¹⁴ Teachers cite a variety of reasons for failing to report suspected sexual victimization of a student, many of which involve concern over potential consequences to the reporter. The rationales for non-reporting given by teachers include:

- Fear of making an inaccurate report
- Concerns that child protective services will not offer help to the maltreated child;
- No additional "proof" of the allegations
- A desire to avoid looking foolish or being "wrong;"
- A belief that reporting abuse only brings about negative consequences for the child and family;
- A feeling that reporting what a child experiences is "not my job;"
- Fear of misinterpreting a cultural issue; or
- A desire to avoid becoming involved in a legal proceeding.¹⁵

One study found that the most significant deterrents to reporting child abuse include a lack of knowledge and understanding on how to detect and report abuse, fear of legal ramifications for false allegations, and the consequences to others of reporting.¹⁶ Personal beliefs and biases also influence failure to report by school personnel.¹⁷ Those required to report abuse often share an affiliation with the institutional setting in which the abuse occurred.

The duty to report lies with the reporter and the responsibility may not be passed on to supervisory personnel. In fulfilling the obligation to report, the report must be made to the appropriate local governmental official, not to the educational or institutional organization.

What should you do to be a protector of children and youth as a safe adult?

- Provide a child who is disclosing with immediate and sincere support.
- Avoid comparing the child's statements/actions with what you expect a victim to do or say.
- Do not subjectively assess credibility or believability of the child or the alleged perpetrator—your duty lies in reporting, and not in investigating or assessing.

- Immediately report any *suspected* or disclosed abuse.
- Report your concern to the appropriate civil authorities; reporting to a superior in your organization likely will not satisfy your obligation to report.
- Know that your failure to report suspected abuse can expose a child to additional trauma (and other children, too).
- Even if you're not sure that abuse is happening, but you have a suspicion, always err on the side of caution for the wellbeing of children and make a report to the civil authorities or local child protective services agency.
- If the suspected abuse involves anyone associated with the Church, after reporting to the civil authorities, then also notify an official specified by your organization.

Conclusion

Whether we are mandated reporters by law or not, we are all ethical and moral reporters. It is up to us as safe adults to communicate all of our concerns—and reporting suspicions or abuse, or alleged abuse, is no exception. We must always be on the side of protecting the child or youth when it comes to reporting suspected or alleged child abuse. It is always the well-being of the child that should guide our communication of concerns.

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