

## The Role of School Nurses in Recognizing, Reporting, and Preventing Child Abuse

By Lawrence Dobrin, DMD and Janet Rosenzweig, PhD

It's devastating to think that an innocent child could be harmed by an adult who is supposed to be protecting him or her. Unfortunately, the media frequently report stories of abuse and neglect that leave the rest of us wishing we could have somehow intervened or understood what was going on in time to prevent tragedy.

In the absence of prevention, the long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect are staggering. They include:

- **Mental illness:** 80% of victims meet the criteria for at least one psychiatric disorder at age 21
- **Delinquency:** Victims are 59% more likely to be arrested as a juvenile
- **Crime:** Victims are 30% more likely to commit violent crime as an adult
- **Addiction:** A greatly increased likelihood of drug and alcohol abuse
- **More abuse:** 33% of abused and neglected children will eventually victimize their own children – continuing the cycle of child abuse

The reality is that child abuse is a pattern of behavior that is preventable through education, support, and intervention. In New Jersey alone, there are several organizations whose mission includes helping children by spreading important messages to those in a position to make a difference.

For more than ten years, the Delta Dental of New Jersey Foundation has offered P.A.N.D.A.<sup>®</sup> (Prevent Abuse and Neglect through Dental Awareness), an educational program teaching how to recognize and report suspected cases of abuse and neglect. P.A.N.D.A. was originally created for dentists who are well positioned to detect child abuse, because two out of every

three injuries occur to the head, face, and neck. In recent years, the program has been made available to audiences such as school nurses, teachers, and other community group leaders who deal with children on a regular basis.

Lawrence Dobrin, D.M.D., a forensic dental consultant and a spokesperson for the P.A.N.D.A. Coalition, says that children often see the school nurse's office as a "safe haven" they can escape to. If a child is making frequent visits to the nurse's office, there's an opportunity to understand what the deeper issues are.

"It is extremely important for school nurses to be aware of early indicators of abuse and how they may be the first to suspect that 'problems' exist in the life of a child," said Dr. Dobrin. "The key is to identify problems early so that the issue is dealing with prevention of a crisis, rather than dealing with the damage of a situation that has already occurred."

### Recognizing Abuse

None of the following signs prove that child abuse is present in a family, since any of them may be found in any parent or child at one time or another. But when these signs appear repeatedly or in combination with one another, it may indicate that a closer look into the situation is needed.

The child:

- Shows sudden changes in behavior or school performance
- Has not received help for medical problems brought to the parent's attention
- Has learning problems that cannot be attributed to physical or psychological causes

- Is always watchful, as though preparing for something bad to happen
- Lacks adult supervision
- Is overly compliant, an overachiever or too responsible
- Comes to school early, stays late, and does not want to go home

### Reporting Child Abuse

It's important to know that any person who, according to the law, reports abuse or neglect, or testifies in a child abuse hearing resulting from such a report, is immune from any criminal or civil liability as a result of such action. On the other hand, any person who knowingly fails to report suspected abuse or neglect according to the law or to comply with the provisions of the law is a disorderly person, and subject to a fine of up to \$1,000 or up to six months' imprisonment, or both.

"The most important thing to know about reporting abuse is that it could save a life. Children die every day from injuries caused by child abuse. Often, someone was aware of the abuse, but didn't report it," said Dr. Dobrin.

Following are frequently asked questions about the reporting process.

What happens when a report is made?

- An investigator may visit the home and interview the child, the parents, or other caretakers. School personnel may be interviewed as "collaterals."
- The investigator helps determine whether the child is being abused or at risk for abuse.
- The case may be referred to social services, Superior Court, Family Division or Criminal Court.