

SPECIAL SECTION

BRIEF RESEARCH REPORTS

Child Abuse and Neglect: The Effect of Knowledge on Reporting Behavior

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In order to ensure the safety of children, all 50 states have laws requiring specified professionals to report suspected abuse (Zellman, 1990). Over the past two decades since legislation was enacted, there has been an increase in reporting of child abuse, up roughly 150% (Abrahams, Casey & Daro, 1992; Kalichman, Craig, & Follingstad, 1990). However, Zellman (1990) estimated that only about one-third of known cases in 1990 were reported.

A review of the literature on child abuse reporting yielded several theories about why child abuse is under reported. Among the most frequently identified reasons is that mandated reporters lack knowledge sufficient to identify child abuse (Trudell & Whatley, 1988; Wurtele & Schmitt, 1992) and/or that they do not understand their responsibilities as mandated reporters (Abrahams, Casey, & Daro, 1992; Hibbard & Zollinger, 1990; Wurtele & Schmitt, 1992). Abrahams, Casey, & Daro (1992) cited studies with teachers, at least two-thirds of whom indicated that they had received no, or inadequate, child abuse training as preservice professionals. In addition, of the 568 teachers in their study, two-thirds stated that they had failed to report suspected maltreatment due to lack of sufficient knowledge on detection and reporting. The purpose of this study was to determine whether general knowledge about child abuse and specific information about mandated reporter status had an impact on decision to report.

Procedures

A two-factor factorial design was used to test the

hypothesis that persons who had high levels of general knowledge and specific information about reporter status would be more likely to report a suspected case of child abuse. College students ($N=196$) likely to become mandated reporters of child abuse were administered the *General Knowledge About Child Abuse* (GNACA) a 34-item inventory developed specifically for this research. Students were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with each item. The content of the questionnaire was based on a comprehensive review of the child abuse literature and was similar in format to instruments used in previous efforts to determine general knowledge levels of mandated reporters (e.g., Hazzard & Rupp 1986; Wurtele & Schmitt, 1992). The GNACA demonstrated moderate reliability (coefficient alpha = .55 overall) as defined for a criterion-referenced test (Kane, 1986).

Instruments were scored and, based on a split median procedure, participants were divided into a high knowledge group (HK, scores >70) or a low knowledge group (LK, scores <70). Individuals were then randomly assigned to one of four group conditions (1 = high knowledge-treatment; 2 = high knowledge-control; 3 = low knowledge-treatment; 4 = low knowledge-control). All 196 of the original participants were notified of the place and time for the second data collection with 79 (40%) returning to participate.

Treatment groups (high knowledge ($n = 21$); low knowledge ($n = 20$)) were provided the state statutes describing mandated reporter status and procedures for reporting suspicions of child abuse. Control groups (high

knowledge ($n = 17$); low knowledge ($n = 21$) were given information regarding academic regulations of the university which were similar to the state statute in both complexity and length of material. After subjects read their stimulus materials, they reviewed a case example describing "Annie," a young child who had sustained repeated, serious injuries. Participants responded to a series of questions about the case, including whether or not Annie appeared to be abused, whether the case warranted reporting, whether they would report the case and, if so, to whom.

Results and Implications

The results of this study do not support the hypothesis that knowledge in either area leads to increased reporting ($F(1, 75) = .030, > .05$). Results revealed no significant effect for knowledge, information, or their interactions on the participants' intention to report suspicions of child abuse. While all of the participants (100%) suspected that the case represented abuse, there was broad disagreement regarding at what point and to whom a report of their suspicions should be made. Although the treatment groups had just read specifically when, how and to whom a report should be made, including the fact that their role as a mandated reporter was not an investigative one, 94.6% ($n = 39$) indicated that they would investigate before reporting, as would 86% ($n = 33$) of the control group.

If knowledge sufficient to identify child abuse and specific information about one's responsibility as a mandated reporter does not increase the likelihood of reporting one's suspicions, what other factors may influence reporting behavior? Participants indicated that they needed more information before they would report their suspicions to the appropriate authority. Future educational efforts may be directed toward developing decision-making skills rather than relying on information about abuse and mandated reporters' status alone. Also, noticeably absent from previous research studies has been the inclusion of factors such as personality traits or characteristics, and level of moral reasoning. Future research efforts need to be directed at discovering how such factors or combinations of factors influence reporting behaviors.

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