

## Knowledge, Compliance, and Attitudes of Teachers Toward Mandatory Child Abuse Reporting in British Columbia<sup>1</sup>

Kirk A. Beck  
James R. P. Ogloff  
Anne Corbishley  
simon fraser university

Research indicates that teachers, among other professionals, continue to underreport cases of suspected child maltreatment. To better understand factors associated with noncompliant behaviour, we investigated teachers' knowledge of, compliance with, and attitudes toward mandatory child abuse reporting in British Columbia. Results showed that virtually all the participating teachers were aware of the existence of the mandatory reporting law; they were, however, only moderately knowledgeable about the specific components of the legislation. Teachers' tendency to respond varied as a function of type of maltreatment, with sexual abuse being most likely to be reported and emotional abuse being least likely to be reported.

Les recherches indiquent que les enseignants, entre autres, continuent à ne pas signaler tous les cas présumés d'enfants maltraités qu'il y aurait lieu de signaler. Afin de mieux comprendre les facteurs associés à ce comportement, les auteurs ont cherché à savoir si les enseignants connaissent la loi qui les oblige, en Colombie-Britannique, à signaler les cas d'enfants maltraités, s'ils la respectent et quelles sont leurs attitudes vis-à-vis de cette loi. Les résultats démontrent que pratiquement tous les enseignants participants savent que cette loi existe, mais en connaissent plus ou moins les dispositions précises.

Child abuse and neglect is still a serious social and public health problem. The damage to a child from maltreatment can range from minor to extensive physical, psychological, and behavioural problems. In the most severe cases, child abuse and neglect results in the tragic death of a child. To protect children from ongoing abuse, jurisdictions in both Canada and the United States have enacted mandatory child abuse reporting laws. These laws explicitly or implicitly require school personnel to report suspected child abuse (Foster, 1991). Teachers are in a unique position to identify and report abuse because of their daily contact with young children. Given that a large percentage of abusive parents were themselves abused as children, school personnel can help break cycles of abuse by recognizing signs of abuse and neglect and reporting such cases.

Although the Carnegie Foundation (1988) estimates that 89% of teachers see abused and neglected children in their classrooms, less than 20% of filed reports

of suspected child abuse come from school personnel (Broadhurst, 1978; Camblin & Prout, 1983; Volpe, 1981; Zgliczynski & Rodolfa, 1980). To account for teachers' low reporting levels, researchers have investigated teachers' knowledge of their reporting responsibilities: McIntyre (1987) found that of 440 responding teachers in Illinois, only 33% reported knowing the existence of their state law; similarly, Baxter and Beer (1990) reported that 16% of teachers were unaware there is a law regarding child abuse reporting—their study also found that less than one-fourth of school personnel had read the Kansas state law regarding child abuse, and only 28% of respondents knew that all school personnel were required to report suspected abuse; in another study, Levin (1983) found that 61% of teachers said they did not know the legal consequences of failing to report suspected child abuse, and 40% did not know the proper reporting procedure.

Before reports can be filed, however, teachers must be able to identify the symptoms of child abuse. To date, much of the research suggests that teachers receive minimal training in detecting child abuse. According to Hazzard (1984), 68% of elementary and junior high school teachers surveyed reported three or fewer hours of education about child abuse, and 62% reported no prior professional experience with child abuse cases. Similarly, McIntyre (1987) found that 81% of teachers received no child abuse training during their college career, and 61% had not received information on child abuse or neglect during in-service training sessions. Bavolek's (1983) study of school personnel in Wisconsin found that 56% of respondents had never received any training about child abuse and neglect.

Due to their lack of adequate training, many teachers are unaware of the important symptoms of child abuse. Thus, child maltreatment may go unrecognized and unreported by many school personnel. In McIntyre's (1987) study, only 30% of the teachers said they were very aware of the symptoms of neglect, 21% of the symptoms of physical abuse, 19% of the signs of emotional abuse, and 4% of the symptoms of sexual abuse. These findings mirror Levin's (1983) study, where teachers perceived themselves as having most knowledge in detecting the symptoms of physical abuse and neglect, and least of sexual abuse.

On a larger scale, the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse (NCPCA) in the United States conducted a nationwide survey of teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about child abuse and its prevention (Abrahams, Casey, & Daro, 1992). The sample consisted of 568 (34% response rate) teachers in 40 school districts across the country. The survey found two-thirds of teachers indicated that their schools are not sufficiently educating them on identifying, reporting, and preventing child abuse and neglect. Ninety percent of teachers who suspected child abuse reported the case, but only 23% reported directly to child protective services. Almost two-thirds of teachers felt that a significant obstacle to child abuse reporting was the lack of sufficient knowledge on how to detect and report cases of suspected child abuse.

Other research findings, however, suggest that teachers fail to report child abuse for reasons other than lack of awareness or inadequate training. For example, some teachers are hesitant to report because they believe that the child's punishment is legitimate parental discipline (Levin, 1983; Turbett & O'Toole, 1983), whereas other teachers are concerned about interfering with family privacy (Abrahams et al., 1992; Manley-Casimir & Newman, 1976). Baxter and Beer (1990) reported that many teachers were apprehensive about reporting for fear of parental retaliation. Other studies have found that teachers fail to report because they fear legal ramifications for making false allegations (Abrahams et al., 1992; Baxter & Beer, 1990; Hazzard, 1984; Wurtele & Schmitt, 1992).

Investigating the potential barriers to child abuse reporting, Abrahams, Casey, and Doro (1992) concluded that 52% of responding teachers were concerned about potential damage to the parent-teacher and teacher-child relationships, and that a lack of support from the school in making a report was a significant reason for failing to report. Bavolek (1983) found that the most frequent reason for school personnel failing to report child abuse was the fear of getting involved (40%); further, almost one-fifth of school personnel felt that a report would not make a difference.

This review suggests that teachers are not fully aware of their reporting responsibilities and do not consistently comply with mandatory child abuse reporting laws. Although various reasons are offered to explain why teachers fail to report suspected child abuse, research to date has not sufficiently explored these factors. In this article we examine teachers' knowledge of the British Columbia child abuse reporting law and evaluate specific factors in teachers' decisions to report or not to report suspected child abuse.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Participants were 216 registered teachers from the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. The sample's demographic and background characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

### *Survey Instrument*

The survey we developed for this study contained five sections.<sup>2</sup> The first section elicited respondents' demographic and background characteristics such as sex, age, highest degree attained, grade(s) mostly taught, and number of years of teaching experience. The second section asked respondents to answer eight multiple-choice questions assessing their knowledge of B.C.'s child abuse reporting law. We developed each question to reflect the essence of B.C.'s current reporting legislation—British Columbia's Family and Child Service Act (1980):

TABLE 1

*Demographics and Background Characteristics of Respondents*

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Teachers<sup>a</sup></i> <i>(n=216)</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Sex		
Male	80	37
Female	129	60
Unknown	7	3
Highest degree attained		
Masters	40	19
Bachelors	173	81
Grade(s) taught		
K-3 (Primary)	38	17.6
4-7 (Intermediate)	41	19
8-12 (Secondary)	101	46.8
K-7	24	11.1
K-12	4	1.8
Unknown	8	3.7
Level of information about child abuse <sup>b</sup>		
Little	46	22
Moderate	127	60
Substantial	37	18
Source of information		
Seminars	131	25.5
Literature	157	30
Discussion with colleagues	156	30
University courses	33	6
Media	23	4.5
Professional experience	20	4
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age (years)	42	8.8
Years of teaching experience	15	8.4

<sup>a</sup> The total number of teachers does not equal 216 for all variables because data were missing for some respondents.

<sup>b</sup> This item reflects respondents' self-reported level of information about child abuse issues (e.g., definition, recognition, legal aspects, procedures), rather than an objective measure.

## Duty to report

7. (1) A person who has reasonable grounds to believe that a child is in need of protection shall forthwith report the circumstances to the superintendent or a person designated by the superintendent to receive such reports.

(2) The duty under subsection (1) overrides a claim of confidentiality or privilege by a person following any occupation or profession, except a claim founded on a solicitor and client relationship.

(3) No action lies against a person making a report under this section unless he makes it maliciously or without reasonable grounds for his belief.

(4) A person who contravenes subsection (1) commits an offence. [1980–11–7]

The third section asked respondents about their reporting experiences during the past year (Zellman & Antler, 1990). Specifically, respondents were asked whether they had reported any child abuse cases in the last 12 months, and if so, to whom they reported, the type(s) of abuse they reported, and the reason(s) why they had decided to report. Respondents were also asked whether they had suspected any child abuse cases in the last year but decided not to report. Similarly, the type(s) of abuse not reported, and the reason(s) for not reporting were collected.

According to Zellman (1990a), professionals report various types of child maltreatment differentially. So long, however, as a child is “in need of protection,” teachers are required to report all types of child maltreatment, regardless of the type of abuse. To determine whether teachers would report child abuse differentially across type of abuse, the fourth section provided respondents with four vignettes of child maltreatment: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. The content of the vignettes was held constant but the type of abuse was systematically manipulated. To control for severity of abuse across vignettes, descriptive data were drawn from research conducted by Giovannoni and Becerra (1979). To assure validity of child maltreatment, the vignettes were previewed by two psychologists and one university professor, each of whom had read B.C.’s child abuse reporting law. They were asked to indicate if the vignettes met the legal definition of child maltreatment, as well as to check the wording of each vignette. All three persons agreed that each vignette represented a reportable incident of child maltreatment. The vignettes presented to participants read as follows:

The custodial parents of a seven-year-old child tell you that their child is not sleeping well at night. During your conversation with the family, the information emerges that the parents . . .

. . . usually punish their child by spanking him/her with a leather strap leaving red marks on the child’s skin. (Physical Abuse)

. . . are constantly screaming at their child, calling him/her foul names, and the child does not play with other children. (Emotional Abuse)

. . . repeatedly show the child pornographic pictures. (Sexual Abuse)

. . . regularly leave the child alone inside the house after dark. Often they do not return until midnight. (Neglect)

After each vignette, respondents were asked to rate their degree of certainty that child maltreatment was occurring, and their tendency to report this incident to the authorities. Responses were coded on 7-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 (Definitely Not Certain/Definitely Would Not Report) to 7 (Definitely Certain/Definitely Would Report).

The survey's final section was designed to measure participants' attitudes toward child abuse reporting. Five statements were developed from a review of the literature (Kalichman, Craig, & Follingstad, 1989; Reisenauer, 1987). The specific statements were:

- (1) I believe that the child abuse reporting law in British Columbia is necessary.
- (2) In my professional opinion, I can conceive of a case when I would not report suspected child abuse.
- (3) To me it seems that the child abuse reporting law is insensitive to the possibility that reporting can cause more harm than good for the child.
- (4) People in my profession should not be required to report all cases of suspected child abuse.
- (5) I believe that the current reporting law/system in British Columbia is effective in addressing cases of child abuse.

Responses to these statements were coded similarly to the questions from the fourth section of the survey.

### *Procedure*

To ensure respondent anonymity, we researchers were not permitted direct access to the pool of teachers; instead, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (B.C.T.F.) selected the sample of teachers and distributed the surveys on our behalf. The sample of teachers was derived by randomly selecting teachers listed in the 1992 computer-base directory of the B.C.T.F. Teachers actively working full-time in Kindergarten through Grade 12 were specifically included in the selection pool of potential respondents. Each teacher in the sample pool was mailed a covering letter, a survey, and an addressed, postage-paid return envelope in the first week of November 1992. The covering letter was printed on Simon Fraser University letterhead and identified the project as university-sanctioned. Three weeks after this mailing, all potential respondents were sent a follow-up "thank you" and "reminder" postcard. To maximize response rates, in the first week of January 1993 all of the original sample were mailed another covering letter, survey, and postage-paid return envelope.

Of 400 surveys mailed to teachers, 17 were returned by the post office as undeliverable. Of the 383 teachers who received the survey, 219 returned them,

yielding 57% of potential respondents. Three teachers returned their surveys with a note indicating that they did not feel qualified to participate, so the final sample consisted of 216 teachers (a 56% response rate). According to Kerlinger (1973), this response rate is acceptable for survey research.

## RESULTS

Preliminary analyses investigated the effects of six demographic factors (sex, age, educational background, grades taught, years of teaching experience, and level of information about child abuse reporting issues) on teachers' knowledge score, past reporting experience, tendency to report the vignettes, and attitudes toward B.C.'s reporting law. Results indicated that teachers' age, educational background, grades taught, and years of teaching experience were not significantly related to any aspects of child abuse reporting we surveyed. Respondents' sex and level of information about child abuse issues, however, were significantly related to their knowledge score and tendency to report the vignettes of child abuse.

### *Knowledge of British Columbia's Reporting Law*

When asked, "Are you aware that a child abuse reporting law exists in British Columbia?" 94% (203 of 216) of teachers said "yes." When asked about their specific knowledge of the components of the reporting law, teachers averaged 60% (4.8 of 8;  $SD=1.77$ ) correct responses on the knowledge items (see Table 2).

A two-tailed  $t$  test was used to determine whether there were significant differences between men and women on their overall knowledge score. Because the variance was homogeneous, pooled variance estimates were used. Results indicated that women obtained a higher mean score than men on the knowledge items,  $t(206)=-2.07, p<.05$ . Women's mean score was 5.0 ( $SD=1.78$ ), men's was 4.44 ( $SD=1.77$ ).

A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant relationship between teachers' (self-reported) level of information about child abuse issues and their knowledge score,  $F(2, 206)=23.88, p<0001$ . Tukey's post-hoc analysis showed teachers reporting substantial levels of knowledge about child abuse issues scored significantly higher on the knowledge items than teachers reporting moderate or little knowledge. Similarly, teachers reporting moderate levels of knowledge scored significantly higher than those reporting little information.

### *Past Reporting Experience*

In answering the question, "In the last 12 months, have you reported any child abuse cases?" 15% ( $n=32$ ) of teachers indicated that they had reported child

abuse in the last year. Over one-half (53%,  $n=17$ ) of these reports were made directly to the Ministry of Social Services (hereafter, Social Services); the remainder were most commonly made to other school personnel such as the school principal, counsellor, or nurse. Physical abuse was the type of child maltreatment reported most frequently by this sample. Of 32 reported cases of maltreatment, 69% ( $n=22$ ) involved physical abuse. Emotional abuse was the type of abuse least reported, being mentioned by just under 38% ( $n=12$ ) of respondents who had reported abuse. Child neglect (44%,  $n=14$ ) and sexual abuse (41%,  $n=13$ ) were equally reported by these teachers. It is important to note that of the cases reported by teachers, many involved multiple forms of child abuse, therefore the sum of frequencies is greater than 32.

TABLE 2  
*Number and Percentage of Teachers Responding Correctly  
to Knowledge Items*

<i>Item</i>	#C <sup>a</sup>	<i>Teachers</i>	
		n	%
What types of child abuse are supposed to be reported? (sexual, physical, emotional abuse, and neglect)	180	216	84
Who is supposed to report child abuse? (any person)	184	216	86
In order to make a report of child abuse, how certain should the reporter be? (reasonable grounds)	176	216	82
Failure to report suspected child abuse is: (a crime punishable by \$1000.00 fine and/or 6 months in jail)	38	216	18
If a person makes a report of suspected child abuse in "good faith," and if the case does <i>not</i> hold up in court, the person reporting: (is immune/protected)	143	216	66
Except for lawyers, the ethical principle of confidentiality ( <i>never applies</i> ) in cases of suspected child abuse.	49	216	23
Under the statute, if a person suspects child abuse, what is the procedure for reporting? (call the Ministry of Social Services)	128	216	60
A report of child abuse is supposed to be made ( <i>immediately</i> ) following the suspicion of abuse.	128	216	60

<sup>a</sup> #C is the number of correct responses.



Reporting in the last year was proportionally higher for primary school teachers. Of the 38 teachers who taught at the primary level, 11 (29%) had reported at least one case of child abuse in the past year. Reporting in the last year was less common for intermediate ( $n=7$ , 17%) and secondary school teachers ( $n=10$ , 10%). Two (9%) teachers who taught at both the primary and intermediate school levels reported child abuse. Data were missing from two respondents about the grade(s) they taught.

Asked about their reasons for reporting, teachers expressed concern about a variety of issues. The most important factor influencing teachers' reporting behaviour was the need to protect the child. In fact, every teacher ( $n=32$ ) responded that the safety and welfare of the child was foremost in his/her decision to report. Forty-four percent ( $n=14$ ) of teachers said they also reported suspected child abuse because of their legal obligation to do so. Reasons for reporting raised less frequently were the need to help to treat the abuser (19%,  $n=6$ ) and the perceived benefit to the rest of the family (16%,  $n=5$ ).

Answering the question, "In the last 12 months, have you suspected child abuse but decided not to report?" 16% ( $n=34$ ) of responding teachers indicated that they had suspected child abuse within the past year but decided not to make a report. Of the 34 unreported cases, one-half ( $n=17$ ) involved emotional abuse. Physical abuse and child neglect were equally suspected but not reported in 47% ( $n=16$ ) of the cases. Sexual abuse was suspected and not reported by 35% ( $n=12$ ) of responding teachers. Again, the sum of the frequencies exceeds 34 because respondents were free to indicate more than one type of abuse for every unreported case.

Failure to report suspected child abuse in the last year was proportionally higher for teachers who taught at both the primary and the intermediate level. Of the 24 teachers teaching Kindergarten through Grade 7, 6 (25%) had suspected child maltreatment in the past year but decided not to make a report. Failure to report in the last year was less common for primary (18%,  $n=7$ ), intermediate (17%,  $n=7$ ), and secondary school teachers (12%,  $n=12$ ). One of the two teachers who taught Kindergarten through Grade 12 failed to report suspected child abuse. One respondent did not indicate which grade(s) he/she taught.

When respondents were asked about their reasons for withholding a report of child abuse, almost 80% ( $n=27$ ) indicated "lack of evidence" as the most common reason. Over 40% of teachers who failed to report their suspicions of abuse believed a report would be negative for the child ( $n=8$ ) or the family ( $n=6$ ). Almost 25% ( $n=8$ ) of teachers decided not to report child maltreatment because they lacked confidence in child protective services. Finally, more than 20% ( $n=7$ ) of teachers who failed to report suspected child abuse indicated that they were uncertain about the definitions of abuse.

*Likelihood to Report Controlled Vignettes*

Although the vignette content was the same and the severity of abuse systematically controlled, variability occurred in teachers' tendency to report the four scenarios. Specifically, the sexual abuse vignette was rated the most likely to be reported by teachers ( $M=6.45$ ,  $SD=.97$ ), whereas the emotional abuse vignette was the least likely to be reported ( $M=5.21$ ,  $SD=1.67$ ). The neglect vignette was rated almost as likely to be reported as the sexual abuse vignette, receiving an average rating of 6.36 ( $SD=1.07$ ). The physical abuse vignette received a mean rating of 5.38 ( $SD=1.70$ ). Women were significantly more likely than men to report the child neglect vignette,  $F(1, 205)=12.42$ ,  $p<.0005$ .

Results of a one-way Anova showed significant differences between level of information and tendency to report physical abuse,  $F(2, 205)=5.85$ ,  $p<.005$ . Tukey's post-hoc analysis revealed that teachers with moderate and substantial levels of knowledge about child abuse issues were significantly more likely to report the physical abuse vignette than teachers with little information. A similar pattern was found between level of information and tendency to report emotional abuse,  $F(2, 204)=3.85$ ,  $p<.05$ . Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's test showed that teachers who reported substantial levels of information about child abuse issues were significantly more likely to report emotional abuse than teachers who stated that they knew little about child abuse.

*Attitudes Toward the Reporting Law*

Although this sample of teachers believed that the mandatory child abuse reporting law is necessary ( $M=6.70$ ,  $SD=.78$ ), they were "not sure" about the effectiveness of the current system in dealing with cases of child abuse ( $M=4.21$ ,  $SD=1.33$ ). Although teachers recognized that they should be required to report all cases of suspected child abuse ( $M=2.27$ ,  $SD=1.76$ ), many indicated that they could conceive of a case when they would not report suspected child abuse ( $M=3.31$ ,  $SD=2.21$ ), particularly when reporting could cause more harm than good for the child ( $M=3.13$ ,  $SD=1.98$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Discussion of our findings requires a note about limitations. Due to the moderate return rate (56%), responses may reflect those teachers most concerned and knowledgeable about child abuse issues; hence it is difficult to determine possible differences between participating and non-participating teachers and, therefore, the results may represent a biased sample. In addition, because reporting laws differ in their respective requirements and wording (Foster, 1991), the findings presented here may not generalize to other provinces or jurisdictions.

Finally, it is important to note that this survey, in part, investigated teachers' reporting *intentions* and not their *actual* reporting behaviour. Consequently, it is useful to view such findings as representative of their ideal reporting behaviour.

Our study suggests that although participants were well informed of the existence of B.C.'s child abuse reporting legislation, many were unaware of the proper reporting procedures. For example, 40% of responding teachers did not know they are required to report suspected child abuse "immediately" to "Social Services." In fact, many teachers incorrectly indicated that the reporting procedure was to consult *first* with others (e.g., school principal) before filing a report. Failure of educators to report child maltreatment to the proper authorities may place the child and other children at risk of continued abuse.

Although many school districts in B.C. have established internal procedures for reporting (i.e., reports being made to the principal or superintendent of schools), it is important to stress that the responsibility for making a report to a social worker rests with the person who has reasonable grounds to believe that a child is in need of protection. A teacher who reports a case of child abuse to a person other than a social worker or police officer has not fulfilled his/her reporting responsibilities, and he/she is *not* exempt from legal liability (for a complete review of the roles of educators, see the *Inter-Ministry Child Abuse Handbook*, 1988, pp. 63–68).

Female teachers scored significantly higher on the knowledge items than male teachers. Given that the mean difference between groups is slightly over one-half (.56) of a correct response on eight knowledge items, the practical significance of this finding is limited. Further research to determine potential sex differences on legal knowledge may be useful.

Of all the cases of child maltreatment reported in the last year, physical abuse was reported most frequently and emotional abuse least. From these data, it is difficult to draw any solid conclusions about why physical abuse was reported more than emotional abuse. One possible explanation for this finding is that teachers are more knowledgeable about the symptoms of physical abuse, and less knowledgeable about those of emotional maltreatment; Levin's (1983) sample of 209 teachers supports this contention. By extension, teachers may be better able to detect, and consequently to report, symptoms of physical child abuse. Because symptoms of physical abuse are often dramatic and visible, teachers may feel that their suspicions of child abuse are more easily proved and substantiated in court. Recent studies have shown that professionals are hesitant to report their suspicions of child maltreatment unless they have conclusive legal evidence that abuse has occurred (Finlayson & Koocher, 1991; Wurtele & Schmitt, 1992). It follows that emotional abuse may be reported less frequently because it is difficult to detect and even more difficult to substantiate in legal proceedings. The data on teacher's failure to report support this contention that they may have difficulty detecting and substantiating emotional abuse.

Consistent with past research (Brosig & Kalichman, 1992), our survey found the most important reason for reporting abuse was to protect the child. In contrast, less than one-half of teachers indicated that they reported because of their legal obligation. Taken together, these findings suggest that teachers view protecting the child as more important than upholding the law. Hence it appears that teachers apply discretion and professional judgement in their reporting decisions. Similar findings and interpretations have occurred in studies investigating the reporting practices of other professionals, including psychologists, medical professionals, and social workers (Kalichman et al., 1989; Zellman, 1990b).

The most common reason for not reporting suspected child maltreatment was lack of evidence. From these data, it is difficult to determine if this failure to report reflects a *perceived* lack of evidence or masks other motives for failure to report (e.g., fear of parents, not wanting to take responsibility or get involved, lack of knowledge about the reporting law). If the reason is perceived lack of evidence, it is important to note that B.C.'s child abuse reporting law does not require teachers to gather evidence or to have proof that abuse has occurred in order to fulfill their reporting duty. The legislation clearly states that a person needs only "reasonable grounds" to believe that a child is in need of protection (Family and Child Service Act of British Columbia, 1980). In this regard, teachers act as an important screening mechanism. Once a report is received by Social Services, the social worker must investigate all reports of suspected child abuse. If the social worker determines that abuse may have occurred, the social worker must immediately notify the police, who are responsible for criminal investigations. Professional training may help to educate and/or alleviate teachers' concerns about reporting child abuse.

Collectively, over 40% of teachers who failed to report suspected child abuse believed that such a report would have negative consequences for the child or for the family. Clearly, teachers experience a dilemma between reporting and not reporting child abuse, particularly when there is a perceived lack of evidence or when the perceived consequences of reporting are negative for the child and/or family. This finding shows that teachers exercise professional judgement in reporting; decisions to report or not report suspected child abuse "are frequently made on the basis of individual case characteristics" (Zellman, 1990b, p. 20). Nevertheless, it is important to note that failing to report can also put the child in greater danger of abuse, and may prevent the parent(s) from receiving the attention and treatment they deserve.

Primary school teachers were more likely to report suspected child abuse. One reason may be that the grades taught during the primary school years correspond with the average age (7 years) of children reported as abused or neglected (Slavenas, 1988). Primary teachers may thus be more likely to encounter an abused child than intermediate or secondary teachers. Another possible reason that child abuse is reported more frequently at the primary level is the daily

contact between teachers and children. At the intermediate and secondary school levels, children often have more than one teacher and, consequently, it may be difficult for those teachers to detect victimization because of their limited time with the abused child. A third possibility is that there is a negative correlation between the child's age and the need teachers perceive to protect the child. In other words, as children get older, teachers may take less responsibility to help ensure children's safety and care.

Interestingly, primary school teachers were also more likely to fail to report suspected child abuse. It seems reasonable to suggest that because primary school teachers have contact with and "know" the parents (more so than intermediate and secondary school teachers), they may be reluctant to report for reasons such as a belief that they have to maintain good relationships with the child's family, not wanting to interfere with parental discipline, and fear of parental retaliation.

The vignette data indicated that teachers were strongly willing to report all scenarios of child maltreatment. There was, however, variability in teachers' tendency to report the vignettes. Specifically, the sexual abuse vignette was the most likely to be reported, whereas the emotional abuse vignette was least likely to be reported. Given that the type of abuse was systematically controlled for and that the vignettes' content was held constant, it seems reasonable to posit that teachers perceive different *types* of child maltreatment as being more or less serious than others.

Women were more likely than men to report the child neglect vignette. Again, the reasons for gender differences are less apparent. Female teachers may be more sensitive to the needs of the child than male teachers as a result of their socialization (Finlayson & Koocher, 1991), and they also may feel more personally and politically motivated to prevent victimization in general. Consequently, women may be more aware than men that child maltreatment can include both harmful acts against a child and the omission of acts to ensure the child's safety.

Level of information about child abuse issues was significantly related to teachers' reporting tendency. Specifically, teachers with substantial knowledge about child abuse were more likely to report both physical and emotional abuse than teachers with little information. Similarly, teachers with a moderate level of knowledge about child abuse were more likely to report physical abuse than teachers with little information. Although decisions to report child abuse are complex, it appears that informing teachers about their reporting responsibilities and providing professional training can be important factors in the decision-making process.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Our study suggests several recommendations for practice. To begin with, educators need to become more knowledgeable about the relevant law. It is critically

important for teachers to know that the standard for reporting child abuse is reasonable grounds to believe that a child is in need of protection. It is not the teacher's responsibility to prove or substantiate cases of suspected child maltreatment. In cases where the teacher is unsure whether or not a child is in need of protection, it is recommended that the educator err on the side of reporting. School personnel need to be reminded that they are fully protected from legal liability for reports made in good faith.

Second, school districts may help educate teachers by providing in-service training programs involving external personnel whose knowledge and expertise is required in the system. In-service training programs should accentuate the reporting law, working definitions of child abuse and neglect, symptoms of child maltreatment, reporting procedures, and teachers' attitudes and personal biases about reporting. These programs could present case scenarios to help teachers develop effective strategies in abusive situations. In-service training programs should be provided regularly to reflect current thinking and understanding of child abuse issues and procedures.

Third, schools should work to coordinate team efforts in the reporting process and emphasize communications between the principal, teacher, counsellor, social worker, child, and parents. This includes follow-up after a case of suspected abuse has been filed. Finally, school districts should provide teachers with written copies of B.C.'s child abuse reporting legislation and specific school policies aligned with the legal requirement.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> We thank the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (B.C.T.F.) and the responding teachers for their assistance and participation. Portions of this article were presented at the annual convention of the Canadian Psychological Association, 29 May 1993, Montreal.

<sup>2</sup> Copies of the survey may be obtained from the second author.

#### REFERENCES

- Abrahams, N., Casey, K., & Daro, D. (1992). Teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about child abuse and its prevention. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 16*, 229–238.
- Bavolek, S. (1983). Why aren't school personnel reporting child abuse in Wisconsin? *Teacher Education and Special Education, 6*, 33–38.
- Baxter, G., & Beer, J. (1990). Educational needs of school personnel regarding child abuse and/or neglect. *Psychological Reports, 67*, 75–80.
- Broadhurst, D. D. (1978). Update: What schools are doing about child abuse and neglect. *Children Today, 7*, 22–24.
- Brosig, C. L., & Kalichman, S. C. (1992). Child abuse reporting decisions: Effects of statutory wording of reporting requirements. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 23*, 486–492.
- Camblin, L. D., & Prout, H. T. (1983). School counsellors and the reporting of child abuse: A survey of state laws and practices. *The School Counsellor, 30*, 358–367.
- Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. (1988). *The condition of teaching: A state by state analysis*. Princeton, NJ: Author.

- Family and Child Service Act*. British Columbia. S.B.C. 1980, c11.
- Finlayson, L. M., & Koocher, G. P. (1991). Professional judgment and child abuse reporting in sexual abuse cases. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 22, 464–472.
- Foster, W. F. (1991). Child abuse in schools: The statutory and common law obligations of educators. *Education and Law Journal*, 4, 1–59.
- Giovannoni, J. M., & Becerra, R. M. (1979). *Defining child abuse*. New York: The Free Press.
- Hazzard, A. (1984). Training teachers to identify and intervene with abused children. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 13, 288–293.
- Inter-Ministry child abuse handbook: An integrative approach to child abuse and neglect*. (1988). Victoria: Province of British Columbia.
- Kalichman, S. C., Craig, M. E., & Follingstad, D. R. (1989). Factors influencing the reporting of father-child sexual abuse: Study of licensed practicing psychologists. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 20, 84–89.
- Kerlinger, F. N. (1973). *Foundations of behavioral research*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.
- Levin, P. G. (1983). Teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and reporting of child abuse/neglect. *Child Welfare*, 62, 387–393.
- Manley-Casimir, M. E., & Newman, B. (1976). Child abuse and the school. *Canadian Welfare*, 52(4), 17–19.
- McIntyre, T. C. (1987). Teachers awareness of child abuse and neglect. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 11, 133–135.
- Reisenauer, T. M. (1987). *Knowledge of, compliance with, and attitudes toward the child abuse reporting law: An examination of the reactions of psychologists, physicians, and master level social workers*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Slavenas, R. (1988). The role and responsibility of teachers and child care workers in identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect. *Early Child Development and Care*, 31, 19–25.
- Turbett, J. P., & O'Toole, R. (1983). Teachers' recognition and reporting of child abuse. *Journal of School Health*, 53, 605–609.
- Volpe, R. (1981). The development and evaluation of a training program for school-based professionals dealing with child abuse. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 5, 103–110.
- Wurtele, S. K., & Schmitt, A. (1992). Child care workers' knowledge about reporting suspected child sexual abuse. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 16, 385–390.
- Zellman, G. L. (1990a). Report decision-making patterns among mandated child abuse reporters. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 14, 325–336.
- Zellman, G. L. (1990b). Child abuse reporting and failure to report among mandated reporters. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 5(1), 3–22.
- Zellman, G. L., & Antler, S. (1990). Mandated reporters and CPS: A study in frustration. *Public Welfare*, 48(1), 30–37.
- Zgliczynski, S. M., & Rodolfa, E. (1980). The teacher's responsibility to the abused child. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 31(5), 41–43.

---

Kirk A. Beck, a graduate student at Simon Fraser during this research, now works in Professional Family Counselling, Surrey Community Services, 9815-140th Street, Surrey, British Columbia, V3T 4M4. James R. P. Ogloff is in the Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, V5A 1S6. Anne Corbishley, affiliated with Simon Fraser University during this research, is now employed with the Work Readiness Program, Gorge Road Hospital, 63 Gorge Road East, Victoria, British Columbia, V9A 1L2.