

# A Child Abuse Reporting Framework for Early Career School Counselors



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School counselors experience various emotions, such as anxiety, when in the role of mandated reporter of child abuse. This manuscript addresses how early career school counselors might experience distress because of the lack of established child abuse reporting procedures, fear of repercussions for the school counselor or student, and limited training in identifying types of abuse. Based on the previous literature, the authors discuss the imperative role early career school counselors have as mandated reporters and provide a framework to assist in the child abuse reporting process. The framework, specifically designed for school counselors, is collaborative in nature and emphasizes maintaining ethical and legal standards, obtaining continual professional development, and following best practices for mandated child abuse reporting.

**Keywords:** child abuse, mandated reporter, early career, school counselors, framework

School counselors often experience anxiousness regarding child abuse reporting (Lambie, 2005; Sikes, 2008). Early career school counselors in particular can experience this because of the lack of established reporting procedures (Lambie, 2005), fear of repercussions for the school counselor or student (Bryant & Milsom, 2005; Kenny, 2001), and limited training on identifying types of abuse (Alvarez, Kenny, Donohue, & Carpin, 2004; Kenny, 2001). Because of these factors, early career school counselors seek and request support to assist them with the child abuse reporting process and clarification on these procedures (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010; Ricks, Tuttle, Land, & Chibbaro, 2019). Therefore, we propose a child abuse reporting framework designed to assist early career school counselors, who are ethically and legally mandated to report child abuse, in the child abuse reporting process (American School Counselor Association, 2016; Sikes, Remley, & Hays, 2010). This manuscript is different from previous literature (e.g., Alvarez et al., 2004; Bryant & Milsom, 2005; Kenny, 2001; Lambie, 2005; Sikes, 2008) because it focuses specifically on the concerns and needs of early career school counselors, as well as expands on previous literature. For the purpose of this article, *child abuse* and *neglect* are defined by the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act Reauthorization Act of 2010 (2010) as “any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (p. 6).

Child maltreatment can have lasting harmful effects on victims. *Maltreatment* includes “medical neglect, neglect or deprivation of necessities, physical abuse, psychological or emotional maltreatment, sexual abuse, and other forms included in state law” (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services [USDHHS], Administration for Children, Youth and Families, & Children’s Bureau, 2019, p. 108). Minimum standards for what constitutes child abuse are defined by federal law and further stipulated under state law (ASCA, 2015; Stone, 2013). Laws and definitions of child abuse can vary across each state, and ASCA (2019b) provides information on Child Protective Services (CPS), laws, and statutes for different states. Furthermore, ASCA’s (2015) position statement, *The School Counselor and Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention*, states: “It is the school counselor’s legal, ethical and moral responsibility to report suspected cases of child abuse and neglect to the proper authorities” (p. 7).

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Mandated reporting is among the many responsibilities school counselors perform within the school setting. School counselors are required by the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974 to report suspected cases of child abuse to the appropriate authorities. School counselors need to become familiar with federal guidelines, their state laws, and school policies regarding child abuse and mandated reporting laws and procedures. ASCA (2016) speaks to the role of the school counselor in child abuse reporting by stating that school counselors are ethically and legally responsible for reporting suspected cases of child abuse to appropriate agencies. These agencies include, but are not limited to, CPS, law enforcement agencies, attorneys, social workers, and case managers assigned to open cases (Bryant, 2009; Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008).

It is essential for school counselors to have knowledge and an understanding of the ethical standards and legal statutes that apply to child abuse reporting (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2011). Two sections from the *ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (2016) specifically address child abuse reporting. The “Serious and Foreseeable Harm to Self and Others” (A.9.) section speaks to ensuring the welfare and safety of students by making appropriate reports to CPS, parents and guardians, and agencies and authorities regarding the abuse. The “Bullying, Harassment and Child Abuse” section (A.11.) highlights the ethical mandates school counselors must follow when reporting suspected child abuse (ASCA, 2016).

Froeschle and Crews (2010) echoed the vital role ethics and legalities play as well as the challenges presented in working with students. Because school counselors serve as an integral part of protecting the health and well-being of children by performing in the role of responsible mandated reporters, it is imperative that school counselors recognize the importance of maintaining student welfare when making decisions pertaining to suspected child abuse. Research regarding school counselors’ ethical and legal competency is limited; however, it has been noted that knowledge of ethical and legal parameters around child abuse reporting has increased in coursework and trainings (Lambie, Ieva, & Mullen, 2013). This necessitates the call for school counselors to have additional knowledge and training in detecting signs and symptoms of abuse and a general understanding of how to report child abuse.

Although the ethical and legal responsibilities of school counselors in the role of reporting child abuse and maltreatment has been recognized (Kenny & Abreu, 2016), counselors might not have received adequate training in identifying and reporting child abuse. Therefore, the authors of this article further recognized the dutiful call to provide a framework for early career school counselors to assist with the process of reporting child abuse. The purpose of this manuscript is to develop an effective mandated reporting framework for school counselors. The development of the framework within this manuscript was guided by the *ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (2016), recommendations by early career school counselors (Ricks et al., 2019), previous literature and research studies (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010; Lambie, 2005; Sikes, 2008), and current mandated reporter procedures (Hogelin, 2013). However, it is imperative to acknowledge that within any such framework, state and school policy must be followed and considered.

### **Child Abuse Trends**

Mandated reporting is increasingly needed because of the extent of child abuse and neglect in the United States. In 2015, CPS agencies received approximately 4.1 million referrals for potential child abuse or neglect, which involved roughly 7.5 million children (USDHSS et al., 2019). Gullatt (1999) published a manuscript that reported the number of abused children to be astonishing. Despite decades passing since the 1990s, the number of children abused today is still considered shocking. In

2017 it was reported that 674,000 children were victims of abuse and neglect (USDHHS et al., 2019). The number of children abused increased by 2.7% from 2013 to 2017, and it is estimated that 1,720 children died from abuse and neglect in 2017, a rate of 2.32 per 100,000 children (USDHSS et al., 2019). These staggering statistics attest to the need for school counselors to become more educated and confident in reporting child abuse.

“Abuse is encountered in all socioeconomic groups, races, and religions” (Lambie, 2005, p. 250). The racial distribution for all children within the United States who experience abuse is 50.7% Caucasian, 13.7% African American, and 25.2% Hispanic (USDHHS et al., 2019). The percentages of victims are similar for both boys (48.6%) and girls (51.0%; USDHHS et al., 2019); however, rates of abuse seem to vary by socioeconomic status. According to Sedlak et al. (2010), children from households of low socioeconomic status experience some type of maltreatment at a rate more than five times higher than other children; they also were more than three times as likely to experience abuse and about seven times more likely to experience neglect. Bias has been suggested as a cause of differentiation in demographics of reported child abuse cases. When looking at school counseling reporting trends, a recent study specifically examining school counselors’ decisions found school counselors were not statistically more likely to report students based on race but were more likely to suspect abuse when students were from a middle or lower socioeconomic class (Tillman et al., 2015). However, research data suggest that the variation in the overrepresentation of low-income children is driven by the presence of increased risk factors among this population (Jonson-Reid, Drake, & Kohl, 2009).

Despite the increased need for school counselors to be proficiently trained in mandated reporting, many school counselors experience challenges with the reporting process. School counselors are frontline workers who develop trusting relationships with children, which in turn leaves school counselors with a much higher reporting rate than other professionals within the school (Bryant, 2009). A study by Bryant and Milsom (2005) found the second most reported legal issue experienced by school counselors was whether to report alleged sexual abuse. However, there are some laws that no longer give school counselors the choice. Furthermore, according to Davis (1995) and Sikes (2008), the reporting of child and sexual abuse cases are the second highest reasons for school counselors to attend court. The increase in reports of child abuse, legal issues experienced by school counselors, and the frequency of court appearances by school counselors also are valid reasons for developing a better, more effective, and easily understood framework for mandated reporting.

### **Challenges in Reporting Child Abuse**

Reporting child abuse and neglect can often be a challenging and stressful experience for school counselors. This might be due to difficulty in collaborating with reporting agencies; the lack of training in child abuse symptomology (Alvarez et al., 2004; Kenny, 2001); unclear guidelines for reporting child abuse (Lambie, 2005), including what defines reasonable suspicion to report (Levi & Brown, 2005); and the fear of repercussions from parents and school officials (Bryant & Milsom, 2005; Kenny, 2001). A recent research study (Ricks et al., 2019) identified challenges faced by early career school counselors, which provided the impetus to further consult the literature to seek what circumstances led to these challenges and how to mitigate potential barriers to reporting child abuse. Each of these challenges are discussed in further detail.

**Collaboration with reporting agencies.** A review of literature on school counselors’ relationships with reporting agencies found that the relationships are disconnected and misunderstood (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010). A study conducted by Sikes et al. (2010) indicated most school counselors had negative experiences when making reports to reporting agencies. Participants in the study reported

high levels of anxiety because of the concern that the report would not be investigated. Consistent with findings from the research study conducted by Ricks et al. (2019), Bryant and Baldwin (2010) found that school counselors experience frustration and irritation when the school counselor's report did not result in an investigation from CPS. Furthermore, a study conducted by Behun, Cerrito, Delmonico, and Kolbert (2019) found that school counselors chose not to report suspected child abuse because of the belief CPS would not intervene effectively.

Furthermore, school counselors experience concern when CPS does not provide follow-up information regarding the report of alleged abuse. A study conducted by Bryant (2009) found school counselors reported 77% of alleged cases of child abuse to CPS, and only 66% of those cases were investigated by CPS. Some school counselors believe they are entitled to information about the ongoing investigation of the report made; however, because of confidentiality, CPS is not legally obligated to provide school counselors with detailed information about an ongoing investigation (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2003; Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2016). After the initial assessment, the CPS caseworker will determine the disposition of the reported case based on state laws, agency guidelines, and gathered information (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2003).

According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2003), CPS agencies use different terminology for this decision. Most states use a two-tiered system of substantiated–unsubstantiated or founded–unfounded. Some states use a three-tiered system of substantiated, indicated, or unsubstantiated. The *indicated* classification means evidence of abuse has been found, but not enough to substantiate the case. A school counselor can be provided information on whether the case was indicated or not indicated by CPS (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2016; Washington State Department of Social & Health Services, 2018).

To resolve this issue, further education and collaboration with CPS and other agencies can aid school counselors' understanding of policies, leading to less frustration for school counselors. Bryant (2009) recommended CPS provide additional training for school counselors on mandated reporting and recognition of child abuse. This training conducted by CPS with schools can improve the working relationship between CPS and school counselors.

Likewise, Hinkelman and Bruno (2008) recommended attorneys, CPS, and mental health professionals gather to discuss child abuse through in-service trainings. During such time, school administrators can review their written policies to be certain they correspond with state laws, ensuring the reporting process is both ethical and legal for school counselors. This practice would mitigate challenges to communication, consultation, and collaboration between school counselors and reporting agencies, which would be helpful.

**School counselors' knowledge of child abuse symptomology.** Previous research studies indicated the most significant hindrance to reporting child abuse is the lack of knowledge in recognizing signs of child maltreatment (Kenny & Abreu, 2016). A study conducted by Bryant (2009) evaluated school counselors' perceived ability to recognize different types of child abuse. Generally, most school counselors felt confident in their knowledge to recognize physical abuse; however, fewer counselors reported certainty in identifying sexual as well as emotional abuse (Bryant, 2009; Bryant & Baldwin, 2010; Bryant & Milsom, 2005; Kenny & Abreu, 2016).

More experienced counselors believe themselves to be competent in recognizing and reporting child abuse, while beginning school counselors with less experience perceive themselves to be less

knowledgeable and in need of additional training (Tillman et al., 2015). Bryant and Baldwin (2010) also found most experienced school counselors reported more confidence in recognizing signs of physical abuse in children. Certain physical and behavioral concerns in children can serve as indicators of physical abuse (Mayo Clinic, 2015; Sikes, 2008). Behavioral changes can include isolation, change in school performance, depressed affect, sudden weight loss or gain, or inability to control emotions (Lambie, 2005; Mayo Clinic, 2015; Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2016; Sikes, 2008). School counselors spend a significant amount of time with children and can be alert to the changes in behavior of a student, or teachers can notify the school counselor of their concerns for a child (Brown, Brack, & Mullis, 2008).

Conversely, certain forms of abuse, such as sexual and emotional abuse, are not as easily recognized by school counselors (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010). *Emotional abuse* can be defined as the continuous use of abusive language that hurts the child's self-esteem or well-being (Mayo Clinic, 2015). Emotional abuse includes verbal and emotional assault, and isolating, ignoring, or rejecting a child (Mayo Clinic, 2015). Lack of empathy, warmth, and understanding also are associated with emotional abuse (McEachern, Aluede, & Kenny, 2008). A study conducted by Bryant and Milsom (2005) stated three-quarters of school counselors in the study felt sure of their ability to identify child physical abuse, but less so in their ability to recognize sexual and emotional abuse. The difficulty in determining emotional abuse can lead to school counselors feeling less qualified to make a report of suspected child abuse (Valkyrie, Creamer, & Vaughn, 2008).

Further training and education on the signs and symptoms of different types of abuse are necessary for school counselors to feel more confident in making a report of suspected child abuse (Herlihy & Corey, 2015). Awareness and instruction on the symptomology of the various forms of child abuse can increase early reporting from school counselors, resulting in improved chances of children recovering from the negative effects of child abuse (Valkyrie et al., 2008).

**Unclear guidelines for reporting child abuse.** Although school counselors are in the role to report suspected child abuse, many still struggle to determine if a report is warranted. School counselors have voiced the issue of needing evidence to make a report of child abuse (Valkyrie et al., 2008). Past studies indicated school counselors felt more comfortable reporting abuse when they had solid evidence the abuse occurred and were more likely to hesitate to report if less evidence was present in the case (Bryant & Milsom, 2005; Tillman et al., 2015). Moreover, a study conducted by Bryant (2009) indicated that the lack of evidence was the main reason school counselors decided not to report the suspicion of abuse.

Despite these findings, it is important that school counselors recognize that it is not their responsibility to investigate the case or determine the truth of the allegation of abuse. In fact, it is not in the best interest of the child for school counselors to investigate the alleged abuse because they do not have the proper resources and it could lead to further issues for the child (Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008; Lambie, 2005; Miller, Dove, & Miller, 2007). The school counselor's responsibility is to follow legal and ethical obligations as a mandated reporter (ASCA, 2016) by reporting all suspected child abuse. It is important for school counselors to be aware of their state laws because it can be a felony if child abuse is not reported (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Additional education on the school counselor's role in reporting child abuse could elevate their understanding of their role in mandated reporting. Being aware that the law does not require school counselors to investigate cases and that they will not be held liable if a report is false (Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008) may increase the reports made by school counselors. It is important for school

counselors to report suspected child abuse to the appropriate agencies and authorities by following state laws and school district protocol to ensure the safety of all children.

**Fear of Repercussions.** Numerous studies have suggested school counselors fear the repercussions that can result from reporting suspected child abuse (Bryant, 2009; Bryant & Baldwin, 2010; Bryant & Milsom, 2005; Sikes et al., 2010). These repercussions may originate from school administration, colleagues (Bell & Singh, 2017; Kenny, 2001; Sikes et al., 2010), or the family of the student (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010; Kenny, 2001; Valkyrie et al., 2008), or impact the relationship with the student (Alvarez et al., 2004; Bryant & Baldwin, 2010; Sikes et al., 2010). Moreover, school counselors may be afraid the family of the child will file a lawsuit against the school and the counselor for making a report of suspected child abuse (Valkyrie et al., 2008). Conversely, a study conducted by Kenny, Abreu, Helpingstine, Lopez, and Mathews (2018) found that all 50 states give immunity to professionals who report alleged child abuse. The purpose of the immunity is to encourage professionals to report suspected abuse, knowing they do not have to fear the repercussions of disgruntled family members (Kenny et al., 2018). Further exposure to the law of mandated reporting can in fact reduce the anxiety of reporting and encourage more reporting of alleged abuse.

Additional education on mandated reporting and a specific plan for mandated reporting can help to alleviate the fears school counselors have when reporting abuse. If the school policy includes a specific model for mandated reporting, then school counselors may be less likely to fear repercussions and follow appropriate guidelines (Committee for Children, 2014; Oloumi-Johnson, 2016; Sinanan, 2011). If faced with disgruntled parents, school counselors can refer to their school policy within the mandated reporting model to verify to the concerned individual that school policy and procedures were followed.

### **Challenges of the Early Career School Counselor**

Early career school counselors are often faced with tremendous challenges as they enter their new work environment. These challenges include differing expectations from site to site and district to district (Hatch, 2008). Although school counselors are designated as mandated reporters, many may struggle with identifying different types of abuse, understanding reporting procedures, and understanding their district and state policies (Bryant, 2009; Ricks et al., 2019). New school counselors may be especially vulnerable to challenges because they are still defining their roles within their new school system and learning what the expectations are for their site. Past research also has shown that school counselors' understanding of child abuse reporting is related to past professional experiences (Bryant, 2009), and early career school counselors can be deficient in this knowledge. Additional training in child abuse reporting is needed to help school counselors become more proficient and knowledgeable in these procedures (Tillman et al., 2015). Currently, there is a lack of research and resources for early career school counselors on child abuse reporting. This proposed framework aims to aid early career school counselors in developing their understanding of child abuse reporting procedures and expectations.

### **Framework Foundation**

The purpose of this article is to develop an effective mandated reporting framework for school counselors based on the *ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (2016), the research from Ricks et al. (2019), and previous literature reviews and research studies. Even though previous recommendations for collaboration have been made, we recognized the need for school counselors to have a specific framework for reporting child abuse that is collaborative and specific to school counseling.

Ricks et al. (2019) examined the experiences of child abuse reporting by early career school counselors (0 to 5 years of experience as a school counselor) in the Southeastern United States. Early career school counselors were targeted because they can be confused and frustrated regarding their roles within the school as mandated reporters (Slaten, Scalise, Gutting, & Baskin, 2013). Participants responded to a survey allowing them to share their experiences and suggestions regarding child abuse reporting using two open-ended questions (Ricks et al., 2019). The two open-ended questions asked: (1) *What types of additional training do you need regarding child abuse reporting?* and (2) *What challenges did you or are you facing as a new SC (0–5 years) regarding mandated reporting?* (Ricks et al., 2019). Findings revealed the need for help identifying types and signs of abuse; staff and faculty training; information on reporting procedures; and additional mandated report training. Additionally, the findings found challenges with mandated reporting including fear of repercussions, agency concern and collaboration, reporting policies, identifying types of abuse, and school counselor responsibilities. The responses to the open-ended questions informed the direction and development of this framework to assist early career school counselors as they navigate the child abuse reporting process.

## **Child Abuse Reporting Framework for Early Career School Counselors**

The purpose of this framework is to provide steps for early career school counselors to ensure their school counseling program is following best practices in mandated reporting. The steps are designed based on the recommendations by the participants in the study by Ricks et al. (2019) to provide clarity in the informed decision-making process when child abuse is suspected. School counselors should adhere to all the steps identified to ensure they are knowledgeable of current research and best practices on child abuse reporting. This information is considered vital for reviewing mandated reporter guidelines and identifying resources to assist students. Additionally, early career school counselors are encouraged to continuously review guidelines and procedures to ensure execution of streamlined services; however, keeping resources is not enough. School counselors should continually update their collected information by participating in ongoing professional development to ensure they remain abreast of changes in laws, policies, agencies, and personnel.

The authors recognize that reporting child abuse is a collaborative effort within the school setting, which includes faculty, administrators, school counselors, and other mandated reporters. Therefore, a collaborative approach was deemed appropriate, especially when seeking support and understanding the gravity of reporting child abuse to the appropriate agencies and authorities. A collaborative approach is substantiated based on previous literature by Gullatt (1999), Bell and Singh (2017), and Ricks et al. (2019). Gullatt called for a collaborative approach to child abuse reporting and recommended school principals be aware and know how to identify child abuse as well as the laws for reporting.

Eight steps have been outlined in the Child Abuse Reporting Framework for Early Career School Counselors to guide early career school counselors in their role as mandated reporters: (1) become familiar with and follow state laws and district/school child abuse reporting policies, (2) become familiar with and follow the ASCA ethical standards, (3) obtain training to identify and recognize signs of child abuse, (4) identify stakeholders, (5) build collaborative partnerships, (6) provide school-based training, (7) report child abuse, and (8) perform post-reporting procedures. Each of these steps includes recommendations and considerations to assist in increasing self-efficacy for early career school counselors in the child abuse reporting process.

## **Step I: Become Familiar With and Follow State Laws and District/School Child Abuse Reporting Policies**

State laws define the role of community members, helpers, and school officials as mandated reporters. Therefore, it is in the best interest of early career school counselors to review the laws on mandated reporting within their state of employment to understand what is expected for mandated reporters, the timeframe to report, and contact information. Knowledge and awareness of state laws is particularly imperative because state requirements to report child abuse vary for each state (Hogelin, 2013; Lambie, 2005). Not only do state laws differ, but schools within the same district can vary in their child abuse reporting policies. Early career school counselors must make familiarizing themselves with state laws and district/school child abuse reporting policies a priority. This should be done during the pre-planning period and first days on the job in order to be knowledgeable and aware of what the laws and policies state. Areas in particular to be aware of include who is to be contacted when knowledge of suspected child abuse has been identified; who officially makes the report; what the procedures are; how to make a report (e.g., electronically, phone call, in person, website); where and how to file documentation of the report; and who to inform once the report has been made.

Some schools and states require everyone who has knowledge of suspected child abuse to file a report. This would include school counselors, administrators, teachers, and school personnel. In some school districts, a designated school official is the individual to make the report. This generally is the school counselor. Therefore, it is incumbent on early career school counselors to be aware of what their role is and how it meets the legal and ethical requirements. School counselors should be aware that if the school has designated only a specific individual to file a report, this may go against the law and possibly jeopardize the school counselor's licensure and certification. Therefore, it is important that all stakeholders in the school setting be aware of their respective state's laws.

## **Step II: Become Familiar With and Follow the 2016 ASCA Ethical Standards**

ASCA ethical standards A.9. and A.11. highlight the responsibilities school counselors have in reporting child abuse (ASCA, 2016). Early career school counselors have received training in their master's programs regarding ethics; however, it is especially imperative to review the ethical standards pertaining to child abuse reporting on a regular basis. This will aid in maintaining ethical dispositions at the forefront, while leveraging the ASCA ethical decision-making process as a guide (ASCA, 2016). Additionally, the ASCA ethical standards can be used as a tool to advocate for school counseling services in reporting child abuse. This is especially useful in circumstances when there might be role confusion by administrators, school personnel, authorities, and agencies. By referencing the ethical standards, school counselors can advocate for their role in reporting child abuse and working to keep students safe.

## **Step III. Obtain Training to Identify and Recognize Signs of Child Abuse**

It is recommended that educators consistently receive training to identify and recognize signs of child abuse (Hogelin, 2013). Kenny and Abreu (2016) recommended counselors seek continued education on child abuse reporting by attending workshops that will help them remain abreast of the changes to reporting laws and requirements. Therefore, school counselors should advocate to receive opportunities to attend professional development conferences and trainings by the district and/or local agencies (Hogelin, 2013). Advocacy is considered an integral component of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012; 2019a). Although regular training is recommended, it is not guaranteed this practice occurs across states and school districts. Furthermore, it would be beneficial for early career school counselors to seek and participate in professional development because of varying types of training they have or have not received on identifying and reporting child abuse during their master's-level school counseling programs.

Laws, protocols, procedures, and staff are continuously changing; therefore, early career school counselors should remain cognizant and aware of these changes. In order for knowledge to remain relevant, school counselors should engage in continued professional development on recognizing child abuse indicators and child abuse reporting. This practice allows the school counselor to remain informed while increasing their self-efficacy in reporting suspected child abuse. Additionally, each year school counselors must continue to update administration and school personnel on procedures and protocol for identifying and reporting child abuse.

#### **Step IV. Identify Stakeholders**

School counselors who seek to strengthen partnerships with administrators (e.g., principals and assistant principals) are in a position to initiate discussion on child abuse reporting procedures and protocols to ensure an understanding of the role of the school counselor as a mandated reporter. Particularly building a partnership with principals is vital to identify the key role school counselors play in the school setting. A study conducted by Bringman, Mueller, and Lee (2010) shed light on the perception principals have on the role of the school counselor. This research indicated that principals have not received prior education on the role of the school counselor; therefore, it would be beneficial to discuss the role of the school counselor with administration. This step is deemed significant because school counselors generally see themselves as more informed in recognizing and reporting child abuse than principals (Tillman et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, a study conducted by Kenny and McEachern (2002) mentioned that both school counselors and school principals report child abuse, although school counselors reported child abuse at a higher percentage than school principals. Still, it is imperative to recognize that both professions—school counselors and administrators—share the common goal of protecting children by reporting suspected child abuse (Kenny & McEachern, 2002; Tillman et al., 2015).

Early career school counselors can leverage this insight by approaching their administrators through a collaborative stance, highlighting this shared goal, and discussing how to ethically and legally report suspected child abuse. This discussion can include, but is not limited to, state laws, district policies, and district/school child abuse reporting procedures. Furthermore, school counselors and school principals who keep the safety of students at the forefront and work together need to reduce role confusion.

#### **Step V. Build Collaborative Partnerships**

**CPS.** This step has been included to encourage partnerships between school counselors and CPS. District school counseling supervisors can support this endeavor by extending an invitation to CPS supervisors to attend a meeting with school counselors. This meeting would be utilized as a rapport-building opportunity as well as a way to share each other's roles, challenges, and strengths. Additionally, this would be an opportunity for CPS to provide updates, contact information, and any other pertinent information.

It also has been recommended that joint training be done with local CPS members and school counselors (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010) to ensure collaboration between agencies and to ensure all participants are exposed to consistent training. Additionally, CPS may be able to provide training to the school system and not only school counselors. "When school counselors understand the limitations inherent in receiving a report, they might, in turn, be more efficacious in their reporting of child abuse" (Bryant & Milsom, 2005, p. 70). This training should include information on the

reporting process, but also on the investigative process so that school counselors develop an understanding of the reactions and behaviors of the investigators (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010). Other stakeholders, such as school psychologists, social workers, and nurses, would benefit from this training as well.

**Law enforcement.** Public safety is the mission of law enforcement officers. Within the school system, police officers and especially school resource officers (SROs) engage in numerous activities and perform numerous duties. One of the duties can include being a member of the school's crisis response team (Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, & Pollitt, 2013). School counselors should work to build a positive working relationship with their SRO and local law enforcement. These individuals can help assist school counselors in providing services when students are a danger to themselves or when the student is in danger. Additionally, SROs have been provided specific training on "student needs and characteristics, and the educational and custodial interests of school personnel" (Cowan et al., 2013, p. 10). Law enforcement and SROs also can help ensure the safety of everyone in the building when a threat arises.

**Attorneys.** School counselors should consider consulting with the school district's attorney to ensure that their rights and the rights of their students and others are being maintained. Most schools have a school attorney that school counselors can communicate with when issues or questions arise. School counselors also must make sure they are aware of legal and ethical guidelines on confidentiality and privacy of student information. Nonetheless, if school counselors find themselves in situations where discrepancies arise, they should call their local department of children's services or attorney (Mitchell & Rogers, 2003). Participants from a study conducted by DeCino, Waalkes, and Matos (2017) reported positive experiences with legal counsel. An attorney not only provides guidance on ethical dilemmas but also legal advice for potential court hearings.

## Step VI. Provide School-Based Training

Stakeholders in the school setting, such as teachers, school nurses, coaches, paraprofessionals, custodians, lunchroom staff, and other support staff in the building, should be provided with training to identify and report child abuse (Hogelin, 2013; Lambie, 2005). It is recommended that training on child abuse identification and reporting procedures be conducted each year; this is mandatory in some states. These individuals interact with students daily and are able to recognize if a student is in distress. Despite their daily interactions with students, many teachers struggle to identify signs of abuse and have a lack of knowledge of reporting procedures (Greytak, 2009). Therefore, school counselors are in the position to schedule dates and times at the beginning of the school year, such as during pre-planning, and mid-year as a refresher to provide school personnel with the training to identify and recognize child abuse as well as inform them of their mandated reporter obligations. This involves addressing state laws, ethical requirements, and district/school policies for child abuse reporting as well as providing the procedures and contact information to make a report.

## Step VII. Report Child Abuse

Child abuse reporting involves several crucial details. These details include, but are not limited to, the name of the child, name of family members (e.g., parents, siblings), individuals who reside in the home, phone number, address, previous history of abuse, academic performance, child dispositions, and concern leading to the report (Sikes, 2008). It would behoove early career school counselors to determine if their school districts have a specific form to complete while filing an abuse report. This resource would guide the process of obtaining all the details for filing a complete

report. If no such resource is available, school counselors should work with key personnel to create a standardized form for abuse reporting. Furthermore, knowledge of the method to make a report is necessary. Reporting procedures for CPS vary by state. Most states prefer an oral report be made to CPS; however, some states require a written report be completed after the oral report has been made (Child Information Gateway, 2017). Because there may be a timeframe in which to call according to state policy, early career school counselors who are aware of the specific method to report will not only report in a timely manner but be more prepared and self-efficacious in their reporting skills and capabilities.

### Step VIII. Perform Post-Reporting Procedures

After the child abuse report has been made, questions often arise about how to support the student who needs to be aware of the child abuse report, and how to respond to parents who inquire about the report. Early career school counselors can reach out to the caseworker to inquire as to what supports might be provided at the school, check in with the student to ensure they are safe, and seek what procedures the district has in place to address parents. When approached by parents, early career school counselors can maintain the disposition of informing parents that all child abuse reports are confidential and that they may contact the caseworker with their questions. Additionally, pamphlets on the role of mandated reporting and resources can be made available in the school counselor's office to provide the parents with assistance in identifying supports. School counselors also can provide parents with referrals to outside agencies, such as counseling or family supports, when asked by parents who are seeking interventions.

## Conclusion

Reporting child abuse is recognized as a crucial element in the role of a school counselor. Early career school counselors often are anxious about reporting child abuse because of the fear of repercussions from parents, lack of self-efficacy in identifying abuse, limited knowledge of child abuse reporting procedures, unclear reporting procedures for school counselors, and lack of collaboration with outside agencies. This article has addressed the challenges faced by early career school counselors and provides a framework to alleviate their anxiety while increasing their self-efficacy as mandated reporters.

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