

Weekly Hot Topic

April 2025

How Often Should Employee/Volunteer Training Take Place and What Should it Include?

By Deacon Anthony P. Rizzuto, PhD

A key element of a comprehensive approach to prevent child abuse in youth-serving organizations is to build a solid training structure founded on evidence-based and outcome-oriented best practices in abuse prevention education – for administrators, employees, and volunteers. Evidence suggests that child safety is best served if the training (and periodic refresher training) is accompanied by organizational abuse prevention policies and procedures, a code of conduct that defines boundaries and expected behaviors, pre-employment and pre-volunteer screening and criminal background checks, self-audits, and regular communication with all staff.

But how much training is enough? What should its content be? Should everyone receive the same training? How often should training be administered? Consider the following situations:

Gail, a 13 year old ninth-grade student, began complaining to her gym teacher after a particularly intense argument with her parents. Despite her complaints, Gail insisted that her bruised face was the result of "bumping into a door." The teacher suspected otherwise because of the location of the bruise and Gail's frightened demeanor, but chose not to act. It was not until Gail began vomiting several months later and was doubled over in pain that the situation came to anyone's attention. Upon examination, it was discovered that she had internal injuries from a severe blow to the abdomen. The girl finally admitted to the teacher about months of physical abuse she received from her father.

And this:

In January, 2014, a California school district was ordered to pay eight million dollars to the families of eight kindergarten special education students as the result of a teacher child abuse case and the failure of administrators to report abuse suspicions to the proper authorities. Parents of the victims alleged that a special education teacher slapped, pinched, and verbally abused the students (some of them non-verbal and autistic) and that school administrators failed to report abuse suspicions to the authorities. The parents sued the district and five current and former employees. Even though there were warning signs, internal district documents suggested school district officials tried to keep the matter under wraps. A review of district documents also showed that knowledge of the teacher's behavior was widespread among school employees. Not only did school administrators fail to report the allegations to the police or child



Marsh McLennan Agency Contacts

MSPLIP.com

Rody Holman | (406) 533-1035
Brandy Garber | (406) 457-4545
Brodie Loushin | (406) 533-1038
Kevin Smith | (406) 457-4547

protective services, they asked a parent not to call police when she called the school with her concerns in December 2012.

In each of these cases, it is clear that: a) abuse of minor children had been taking place for some time; b) that it was suspected by, observed, or reported to one or more individuals in the organization (in this case, both schools); and c) that school personnel either didn't know what to do or chose not to act although both district policy and state law required them to. As a result, the abuse continued for several months to almost a year. A robust training program, with periodic (at least annual) follow-up training could have helped to prevent this from occurring.

On-line and facilitator-led abuse prevention programs and curricula should be focused on teaching all employees, staff, faculty, volunteers and other adults about the nature of all forms of child abuse (physical, emotional, sexual abuse and neglect); its prevalence in society; how to recognize the physical and behavioral signs and symptoms of abuse and neglect; how to communicate with children about these issues; the types of disclosures; detailed guidelines for how to react to a child who makes a disclosure; how to create and maintain safe environments; ways that offenders behave and operate in families and communities; the aspects of the grooming process; the signs an adult should look for in a person who may be abusing a child in any way; how to intervene when children are at risk; the responsibilities of mandated reporters; the reporting chain; and the state laws and policies about reporting suspected maltreatment of children to both organization and civil authorities.

The training should also include information about the organization's policies and procedures regarding controlling access to children by standardizing and strengthening the employment application process, requiring criminal background checks, and completing standard interviews and reference checks along with a signed code of conduct. The training program should also incorporate information about monitoring programs, physical plant security (lighting, locked rooms, access to buildings and areas within buildings, doors left open when seeing a child alone, etc.), communicating with children, and communicating one's concerns about behaviors or conditions that lead one to suspect abuse is or may be taking place.

Of particular importance in a training program is the need to address the situation where an employee or volunteer makes an abuse report to a supervisor or other designated organizational authority and the supervisor/authority disagrees that a report is necessary. If the supervisor/authority determines that the situation is not reportable, but the original reporter remains convinced that a child is being abused, laws in many states require the original reporter to contact police or other civil authorities, and afford the reporter legal protections for doing so. This circumstance should also be included in the organization's policies and procedures, along with a statement that no punitive action will result.

Although many organizations employ a single, "one size fits all" training program, some have two distinct levels of training in terms of the intended audience and duration: a longer training for administrators, faculty, and program and project directors that includes information on policies, procedures, staff screening, hiring practices, supervision, oversight, compliance, program registration, investigative procedures, state laws and local reporting requirements; and a more streamlined training for the "front line" staff and volunteers who actually deal with the minor children. These training programs are less focused on administrative and policy concerns and are more "code-of-conduct" oriented, including guidance on interpersonal behaviors and relationships, how to recognize maltreatment, grooming, and how to respond to and report suspected maltreatment and inappropriate behavior.

Best practice suggests that after initial training, periodic follow-up is necessary in order to remind all staff of the importance of reporting suspected, observed or self-disclosed abuse and neglect. An annual (at minimum) refresher course, and ongoing communication about leadership's commitment to keeping children safe (monthly newsletters, practice scenarios at staff meetings, case studies during professional development opportunities, etc.) are key to maintaining the knowledge and vigilance necessary to maintain an environment that is responsive to all suspicions, allegations or observations of child maltreatment.

Had effective training and communication structures been in place in the scenarios above, it might have been clearer to the adults involved that it only requires a suspicion (scenario 1) that abuse is taking place in order to report, and that any employee (scenario 2) may file a report of abuse – especially abuse that is observed – without fear of retribution. The result may have ended the abusive behavior, and the children’s suffering, sooner.

Information provided by BRIT

