

Reflecting on Abuse and Neglect

This is a fictionalized account of actual events that occurred on a U.S. military installation. The names, exact dates, locations, and service-specific terminology have been changed or neutralized. To create the activities in this and subsequent lessons, we started with the facts of a real criminal investigation and lawsuit. What you will read here goes beyond the facts recorded in the criminal case by imagining details of individual's thoughts, feelings, and actions. Although much of what you will read here is fiction, the sequence of events and the tragic consequences are very real.

This activity introduces you to Braden and Bethany's story. Some direct care staff members have read the same scenario in their lessons, but they will answer different reflection questions. This story has been specifically chosen to highlight in the T&Cs track because this family's experiences might be applicable across your work with different age groups. The family had children of different ages in a variety of child and youth programs. The purpose of this activity is for everyone to be familiar with the facts of a real case and to reflect on issues that are relevant to their roles.

Braden and Bethany's Story: Part 1

Braden (age 9) and Bethany (age 11) were biological siblings who had been in and out of foster care since they were toddlers. Now pre-teens, they had been placed in the home of Derrik and Melinda Miller. The Millers were in the process of formally adopting Bethany and Braden. Neighbors and friends often joked that the Millers were "saints" for taking in pre-teens. Mr. Miller was an active-duty Service member, and the family lived on a military installation on the east coast. They were, by all appearances, a respected, affluent, devout, and happy family. The family had two biological sons (ages 12 and 15) and one adopted daughter (age 2) living in the home. All of the family's children attended the installation's child and youth programs: the Child Development Center for the 2-year-old, the School-Age Program for Braden and Bethany, and the teen center for the two older sons.

After a few weeks in the home, Derrik and Melinda called a family meeting on a Friday evening. The meeting began by sharing the rules for the family home. On the table sat 3 items: a belt, a piece of rubber hosing, and something that looked like a riding crop. Derrik told the children how important discipline was in their family. "I know you two have been on your own a lot and with lots of different families. It's different here. Here we expect obedience." He showed each of the three items to the children and explained how and when they might expect to receive a beating with each item. When Braden rolled his eyes, Derrik said, "That is exactly what I am talking about." He forced Braden to stand up and receive a beating with the belt. Melinda told the children that the parents and older siblings would help "train the children how to behave." She handed the piece of rubber tubing to their 12 year old biological son. "Caleb will help you learn. Bethany, it was not ok for you to refuse to eat your dinner tonight. I cooked that dinner for you, and you will be respectful at meals. There will be no food or drink until you learn to eat what's given to you. You can try again at dinner tomorrow night. Until then, Caleb will make sure you do not go into the kitchen or drink out of the sinks. Tomorrow night you will sit at the table. You will say, "Please," and "Thank you, ma'am," and you will eat everything on your plate. Is that clear?"

By lunchtime the next day, Bethany was very hungry. Braden tried to sneak some food to her. Caleb saw the whole thing. While his parents watched, Caleb beat Braden so badly that he suffered a broken bone. When Derrik heard Braden crying, Derrik just said, "I'm disappointed you disobeyed."

You'll heal. I don't want to see you crying or hear another thing about it." Braden never saw a doctor for his injuries.

Later that night, Melinda made a post on her parenting blog. On it she wrote about the need for obedience and peace in the home. She wrote about how spanking a child can "bring peace" and "help set the boundaries that help the child know they are loved." She wrote about helping pre-teens "overcome their evil selves" and "learn to be a family."

All of the Miller's children attended the same public school system. They also attended the school-age and teen programs on the installation. Bethany and Braden often got in trouble for their behavior at school and in the programs. Bethany challenged anyone in authority. She would scream and swear at adults. Both children got in fights regularly. They were seen by social workers and mental health professionals who encouraged the Millers to keep providing consistent routines and firm boundaries.

One afternoon in the school-age program, Braden was having a snack with friends. A staff member overheard several of the children bragging about the spicy foods they could eat. He heard Braden say, "That's nothing. Even our baby brother has to eat hot sauce. Whenever I talk back, I have to eat a whole spoon of hot pepper...so I can handle spicy stuff better than you." He saw Caleb quickly jump up, grab Braden by the shirt, and say, "Shut up. You are such a liar. You should be happy you even have a place to live. Don't talk about my parents." Braden looked completely frightened by the incident. The staff member separated the boys, and made a note of what he heard and saw. He talked to his manager about it. They decided they would monitor the situation. They both agreed with each other that Braden often told stories that didn't seem true, but that Caleb's behavior (and Braden's fearful reaction) was unusual. They kept a record of the encounter and decided to try to find resources to help build a relationship between Caleb and Braden.

Not long later, Bethany confided in a staff member at the school-age program. Bethany had grown to trust and look up to the staff member, Sasha. Bethany told Sasha about the beatings and about "obedience tests" that she was forced to perform. She said the Miller's oldest biological son, Jonah (age 15), helped his parents teach the children how to obey. He began giving Bethany "obedience tests" where he would ask her to do a variety of tasks. If she did not comply, he would tell his parents that she had been "disobedient." She said it was usually ok, but last night he made her lay underneath him in her bed. She was scared to go home. She begged Sasha never to tell anyone. Sasha said she could not make that promise and that she wanted Bethany and her brother to be safe. She talked to her manager, who also remembered the recent incident with Braden, and made a report to Family Advocacy Programs (FAP) about the conversation.

Family Advocacy Programs took the report, and an investigation began shortly after the report was made. The Millers lost custody of all 5 of their children. Ultimately, Derrick and Melinda were arrested and charged with endangerment, assault, and conspiracy. They face a maximum of 10 years in prison if convicted.

Reflection Questions for Training and Curriculum Specialists:

The Miller's Story seems like an obvious example of child abuse and neglect. In reality, though, it was hard to tell just how much danger the children were in.

Why do you think it is so challenging to recognize abuse and neglect?

One of the challenges related to identifying child abuse and neglect is that each person often only sees a tiny portion of a child's experience. In this story, few people might have known how harsh the discipline was in the Miller home.

It is also sometimes challenging to distinguish between abuse and inappropriate discipline in the family. People might be hesitant to question parenting practices. We might say things like, "They are just figuring each other out." We might even use the family's stress to explain away the situation, "They're going through so much right now. They're not themselves. Once everything calms down, everything will be OK." Some people may also see the Miller's behavior as examples of "strictness" or "discipline." They might want to respect a family's right to raise their children in the way they see fit.

Think about the fact that we often only have a small piece of information about a child's experience:

- **What might you see or hear directly?**

This depends on how active your role is with children and families. You might see the bruises and marks on the children's bodies when they come in the building or during your time in the program. You might notice behavior amongst the children or teens that strikes you as strange. You might have conversations with the family that make you uneasy. You might hear a negative interaction while the children or teens walk by your office. You might notice concerns with the family's understanding of appropriate discipline strategies during a parenting class or other event.

- **What might you see or hear through staff members?**

Staff members might call you for support when they are concerned about injuries or something they have observed. They might ask you to confirm their concerns and provide advice about next steps. You might overhear staff members complaining, venting, or expressing concern about things the family, children, or youth say or do.

- **What might you see or hear through families (either the Miller family or other families in the program)?**

You might notice other children or youth seem scared of the adults in the Miller family. These children might have witnessed harsh discipline. You might hear comments about adults being "stern" or "strict."

What types of child abuse or neglect do you think the children in the Miller house were experiencing?

The children experienced several types of abuse and neglect. They experienced physical abuse at the hands of older siblings and adults. They also experienced emotional abuse as they were forced to be obedient or to harm one another. Bethany and Braden were physically assaulted. They were beaten with rubber hosing and various other objects. Braden got a broken bone from one of the beatings. There is evidence that they were forced to eat painful objects like hot peppers or hot

sauce. The family also failed to meet the children's basic needs on various occasions. Food and water was withheld from Bethany. Braden did not receive medical treatment for his injuries. Bethany was also forced into sexual contact with her older sibling when Jonah forced himself on her.

Bethany and Braden weren't the only children who were maltreated, though. Caleb and Jonah were coerced into physically assaulting other children. All of the children in the family were victims of emotional abuse. They witnessed, experienced, or were expected to commit acts of violence. They lived in a climate of fear.

Although nothing is said in this story about the two-year old child who attends the CDC, what do you think she is experiencing? How might you support staff members who work in that program?

This child might be witnessing violence. She might show social and emotional or behavioral concerns. She might show signs of experiencing abuse or neglect. Make sure staff members are knowledgeable about identifying and reporting suspicions of abuse and neglect.

Do you think some types of child abuse and neglect are easier for staff members (or yourself) to identify than others? Why or why not? If so, which ones?

Responses might vary, but physical abuse often has the most visible signs. A child has bruises, cuts, burns, broken bones, or other injuries. These can sometimes seem difficult to miss or unmistakable. Other types of abuse or neglect sometimes seem more difficult to identify. Perhaps an interaction between an adult and a child seems troubling, but it takes a while for an observer to notice a pattern. Or a child makes a comment that raises suspicions, but the observer has doubts or wonders if she misinterpreted the statement.

Think about the definition of child abuse and neglect. Be prepared to help staff members recognize harm and imminent risk of harm. Respond to each component below:

- **A recent act or failure to act:** What did adults do to mistreat children in the Miller house? What did they not do?
They used belts, rubber hosing, and a riding crop to beat the children. The children suffered broken bones. They withheld food and water. They forced children to eat painful objects. They did not provide medical care. They encouraged violence and failed to stop abuse committed by their biological children.
- **On the part of a parent or caretaker:** Who was involved in the abuse or neglect? Who else was victimized?
The foster parents committed most of the abuse and neglect. The older siblings were perpetrators of some of the abuse, but in many ways they were victims, as well.
- **Which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation:** What harm did the children experience? You will learn more about the signs of abuse and neglect in Lesson 2.
Braden had broken bones. Bethany was involved in sexual behavior. Also there was serious emotional harm being done to all of the children (the emotional harm can be even more damaging than the physical abuse.)

- **Or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm:** What situations presented an imminent risk of harm?

The staff member at the school-age program sensed an imminent risk of harm for Bethany. She called authorities for assistance when they thought Bethany might be in danger. The "act" was the physical and emotional abuse. The children were beaten, whipped, neglected, etc. The abuse they were enduring was harmful and there was ongoing imminent risk of continued harm.