

Reflecting on Abuse and Neglect

Braden and Bethany's Story: Part 4

You have learned a lot in the past few lessons about the Miller family. Take some time to reflect on the story.

1. As a leader in the program, it is important for you to know that the staff members in these stories did everything they could to protect the children. They did everything right. What are some challenges you and staff members might face?

First, you see children for a relatively short period of the day. You may only get small pieces of information. Depending on the age of the child, your suspicions might be founded on what children say, what you or staff members overhear, or what staff members tell you. You might not have the opportunity to see cuts, burns, or bruises that a child tries to hide. This naturally puts you in the difficult situation of making decisions based on limited information. Child abuse and neglect is complicated. Often, there are many witnesses across many different locations. Each witness only has one tiny piece of information. It can be very challenging to put all of the pieces together. Our systems must be designed to help collect information and make accurate decisions. When multiple signs point to child abuse or neglect, though, our systems should be able to recognize a pattern and provide the family with preventive supports.

Finally, it can be challenging to know just how serious a situation is in the home. You might see families for a very brief time each day. The Miller family clearly needed support. As soon as foster children were placed in the home, a community support network (mental health support, violence prevention, parenting education) should have been put in place for the family.

2. What can you do to make sure you do your part to keep children safe?

Take stories like the Miller's as a clear message that we must all work together to protect children. We each play a role, and we must do our jobs well. Your job is to report your suspicions. You must trust that everyone else does their jobs well, too. Talk to your FAP team. Know who your FAP teams are and talk to them about the work they do and how you can support one another's work.

3. Imagine Braden, Bethany, and Caleb were children in your program, and you are a direct-care staff member:

- a. Describe your emotions the first time you see a negative interaction between Caleb and Braden.

In Braden's case, you might feel angry about the dynamic between two foster brothers. You might want to stand up for Braden. You might be worried that something is wrong. You might feel doubtful that wrongdoing is occurring and attribute the behavior to typical arguments between pre-teens.

- b. Describe your emotions when Bethany tells you about her “obedience tests.”

You might feel angry that Bethany is not safe in her foster home. You might be shocked that something like that is happening. You might feel sad that Bethany has had to endure it. You might feel conflicted about whether or not you can keep Bethany’s secret, and you might feel bad about “betraying” her trust (although you are doing the right thing). You might feel relieved or proud of Bethany for opening up to you about it. You might be afraid for Bethany’s safety.

- c. Describe your emotions when you read Melinda Miller’s blog about parenting.

You might feel angry or offended. You might feel spurred to action. Alternatively, you might sympathize with the family. You might feel that this family was struggling and used the tools they had available to them.

- d. Describe your emotions when the children are removed from the Miller home.

This is a very personal answer. You might be relieved that they are safe, but you might also be very concerned about where they will be placed next. Bethany and Braden have lived in a long line of homes, so you might be concerned that they will be placed in another difficult situation. You might be frustrated if you can’t find out answers. You might be disappointed if the children are moved out of the area and away from your program.

4. The previous question was an exercise in empathy. Think about these questions:

- a. Why is it important to think about how mandated reporters might feel in situations like this?

Making a report of child abuse or neglect is a highly emotional experience. These emotions can get in the way of doing the right thing. They can also compromise a staff members’ personal and professional well-being. By thinking ahead about the possible emotions staff members might feel and trying to empathize with them, you can relate to them in a different way. You can help anticipate problems or concerns and better prepare yourself to facilitate your program’s procedures.

- b. How does putting yourself in a staff member’s place and trying to imagine how he or she feels impact your work with staff members?

Doing so helps you build relationships with staff members. It also helps create an environment of reflection, self-awareness, and support.

5. Now think about all of the emotions and the reasons staff members might be hesitant to report concerns. Complete the table below.

Reason staff members might hesitate to report:	Reason I can share about why they should report or ways to solve the problem:
<i>The Miller family is so nice. They are doing the best they can, and I shouldn't judge.</i>	<i>Making a report will help keep the children safe and might help the Millers get the skills they need to raise the children safely.</i>
<i>Bethany might get hurt even worse if I make a report.</i>	<i>Once I make a report, systems will operate to keep Bethany safe. I need to take the first step.</i>
<i>I'm scared to make a report. I don't want to cause any trouble.</i>	<i>I can talk to my trainer or supervisor about my feelings and what will happen next.</i>
<i>Everybody has a right to parent their children in the way that's right for them.</i>	<i>No one has a right to hurt a child physically or emotionally.</i>