

What If...

Suspecting Child Abuse in a Child Development Program

No one ever wants to suspect child abuse or neglect. There are times, however, when you must follow your instincts. If you suspect abuse or neglect, your call can save a life. Read the following scenarios and answer the questions.

Scenario 1:

“Tyrone, you need to stop crying right now,” Cassidy barks as she goes to Tyrone’s crib. Tyrone is standing in his crib and sobbing. She grabs the 10-month-old forcefully by the shoulders, puts her face in his, and says, “Stop. Now. I will not pick you up until you calm down.”

Is Cassidy’s behavior appropriate? Why or why not?

This behavior definitely makes us suspect that Cassidy is capable of emotional and physical abuse. She has unrealistic expectations for Tyrone’s behavior. She uses physical force to try to get him to stop crying. She refuses to comfort the baby.

What steps would you take to respond to this situation?

Step in and help with Tyrone. Immediately make a report to your supervisor [or DoD hotline]. Cassidy’s behavior is harmful. It must be addressed. If Cassidy remains in the classroom, have a conversation with Cassidy. You could say, “Cassidy, Tyrone’s nap did not feel safe. It seemed like you got really frustrated. We need talk about ways to work with him.”

Scenario 2:

Your relationship with Tish, an assistant in your school-age program, has been rocky since the beginning. She does not always show up to work when she is scheduled, and she calls in sick more often than you would like. Today she has seemed really distracted. You’ve asked her if everything is OK, but she just nods and keeps to herself. On the playground, she looked at her phone and went inside without a word. The other adult called in to say she was alone and out of ratio on the playground. While you rush out to help, you see a scuffle in the basketball area. Preteens are pushing one another and threatening to fight over a disagreement in scoring.

Is Tish’s behavior an example of neglect? Why or why not?

Yes, Tish’s inaction has put children at risk. She is not providing any supervision or appropriate care to the children. She left the class out of ratio, and children are getting injured.

What steps would you take to respond to this situation?

Do your best to help the remaining teacher keep children safe. Go to the basketball court. Use guidance strategies to diffuse the situation.

Report the situation to your supervisor [and the DoD hotline]. As a trainer or coach, you will need to address this issue with Tish in terms of professional development but she may also face disciplinary action. Before she is permitted to be responsible for children, she must recognize that her behavior was unacceptable and that she put children at risk.

Scenario 3:

Jamie, a staff member in your preschool program, comes to you for help with a child’s behavior. She tells you Inez has been acting strangely lately. Inez panics every time her mom drops her off in the morning. Lately, her mother has had to carry her in screaming. You’ve noticed this, too, and you’ve noticed how concerned Inez’s mom is about the behavior. She clearly has to fight back her own tears as she leaves. Jamie can’t quite remember when Inez’s behavior started, but she tells you it has gotten worse.

You take some time to chat with Inez’s mom during drop-off. She shakes her head as she holds her and looks at you for help. She tells you, “She starts screaming as soon as the Child Development Center is in sight. Last night we drove by on our way to dinner, and she sobbed and screamed. I don’t know what is going on.” You reach out your arms and ask Inez if you can help her say goodbye to mom. She willingly comes to you. Just then, a staff member brings in breakfast. You feel Inez’s entire body go tense in your arms. She buries her head in your shoulder as if she is trying to disappear. You remember the class’ field trip to the nature preserve two weeks ago. That staff member had been assigned to help with the class. That staff member also floats between classrooms filling in as needed. Is it possible Inez is frightened of the staff member? What could have happened?

What evidence makes you suspect child abuse or neglect?

Inez’s behavior has changed. She seems frightened of school and of a particular staff member.

What steps would you take to respond to this situation?

Work with Jamie to gather all the evidence possible about Inez’s experiences in the classroom and the program. Collect information about the times or people that are likely to spark fear in Inez. Ask Jamie to provide information on staffing patterns and times when different staff members might have had the opportunity to be alone with Inez. Pay careful attention to the staff member who frightens Inez. Share your concerns with your facility manager and monitor the employee carefully. Make sure all background checks are up-to-date. Talk to the staff member who frightens Inez about his or her experiences with that class. Ask about the field trip and about how that staff member supervised

children (was he or she ever alone with children, did anything happen that might have scared a child). Write down all of the evidence and compare sources of information. Immediately report your suspicions if you suspect abuse. Be prepared to refer Inez's family to counseling and support groups.

Scenario 4:

It is Taylor's fifth birthday today. She is an energetic and passionate child. She is a leader in the classroom, but unfortunately she usually uses her leadership skills to get other children in trouble. You know she pushes your buttons sometimes, but today she really seems to be bothering your co-teacher, Melinda. Taylor won't stop talking about tonight's birthday party and cupcakes. It has been the only topic of conversation today because some children were invited and others weren't. Taylor does not seem at all interested in her lunch. When Melinda reminded Taylor to eat her food for the third time, Taylor stuck her tongue out and said, "You're not the boss of me. My mom says I'm a princess and I don't have to eat your gross food if I don't want to." You see Melinda's face turn red. Melinda snatches Taylor's plate away and walks to the trash can. "Fine. If you don't want to eat, you can go hungry." Taylor begins to cry, "I want that back. I'll finish my burger." Melinda responds, "No. You made your choice," and throws away the food.

Is Melinda's behavior appropriate? Why or why not?

No, her behavior is not appropriate. Withholding food could be considered abusive. It is an inappropriate discipline strategy for child development programs.

What steps would you take to respond to this situation?

You must intervene. Taylor must have the opportunity to eat lunch. Protecting a child is worth risking your relationship with your coworker. Say, "Taylor, I know it's your birthday and you are excited. It's not OK to be disrespectful to Ms. Melinda, though. I will make sure you have a lunch. Once we eat and calm down, we can all talk about it again."

Scenario 5:

Ruby is serving breakfast to a small group of preschoolers. Jasmine arrives to drop off her twin daughters, Julia and Josey. Ruby smiles warmly and calls across the room, "Good morning, Twin and Other Twin. How are you two doing today?" Jasmine replies, "They're good" and helps them put their coats in their cubbies. Ruby says with a laugh, "I don't know how you can tell those girls apart. I just call them Twin and Other Twin 'cause there is no hope for me." Jasmine just nods, clearly at a loss for words. She kisses the girls goodbye, and you see the girls cling to her and cry for her not to leave.

Is Ruby's behavior appropriate? Why or why not?

This behavior makes us suspect that Ruby is capable of emotional mistreatment. Ruby is not taking an interest in the children in her care. She has not made the effort to even learn their names or build a relationship with them. She has also made it clear that she does not plan to make that effort.

What steps would you take to respond to this situation?

Talk about the situation with your supervisor or trainer. Ruby needs to learn sensitivity and the importance of reaching out to all children and families. Make a point of learning the girls' names. Talk about your concerns with Ruby.

Scenario 6:

Patrick, a 19-years-old staff member, has recently joined the staff at your school-age program. He seems to spend a lot of time in the "lounge" area of your program playing video games and hanging out on couches with the kids. Several of the preteen girls seem to seek out his company. When you look over towards the lounge area today, you see several 12-year-old girls tickling him and trying to sit on his lap. He looks uncomfortable, but he is playing along.

Is Patrick's behavior appropriate? What behaviors need addressed?

No, Patrick's behavior is not appropriate. At the most basic level, he is focusing his supervision on only one part of the program. His help and attention is most likely needed in other areas. The biggest problem, however, is allowing or encouraging girls to sit on his lap. He is an authority figure and any potentially sexual contact with children is inappropriate— regardless of who initiates the contact.

What steps would you take to respond to this situation?

Talk to Patrick right away, make sure he and the girl separate, and notify your supervisor of what you saw. Patrick must be made aware that it is not ok to have physical/ affectionate contact with children. He should review your program's touch policy with a supervisor.