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The tightrope of abuse reporting

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Child abuse is a serious problem in the United States, as it is in Britain. Large numbers of children suffer physical battering, sexual abuse and neglect, requiring firm and effective social intervention. Unfortunately, the "child protection" systems of both countries are plagued by the simultaneous problems of under- and over-reporting of suspected maltreatment of children.

Failure to report exposes children to serious injury, even death. On the other hand, a report triggers what may be a deeply traumatic experience for all involved. And inappropriate reports unnecessarily increase the burdens on chronically understaffed agencies, making them less able to protect children in real danger.

How big is the problem? In America, 65 per cent of all reports are deemed "unfounded" or "unsubstantiated", meaning that they are closed after an initial investigation reveals no evidence of maltreatment. Such high rates of closure are deeply unfair to parents. The determination that a report is unfounded can only be made after an unavoidably traumatic investigation that is inherently a breach of parental and family privacy. To determine whether a particular child is in danger, caseworkers must inquire into the most intimate personal and family matters. Often it is necessary to question friends, relatives and neighbours, as well as teachers, day care personnel, doctors, clergy and others who know the family. The flood of unfounded

reports is overwhelming the limited resources of child protection agencies, who are less able to respond promptly and effectively when children are in serious danger.

These conditions help explain why about 40 per cent of all child abuse deaths involves children previously known to the authorities. Tens of thousands of other children suffer serious injuries short of death while under child protective supervision. At the same time, large numbers of obviously endangered children are still not being brought to the authorities' attention. According to the *Study of the National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect*, in the US professionals failed to report almost 30 per cent of the sexually abused children they saw. They did not report nearly 15 per cent of fatal or serious physical abuse cases (defined as life-threatening or requiring professional treatment to prevent long-term impairment) and almost 40 per cent of moderate physical abuse cases (defined by bruises, depression, emotional distress, or other symptoms lasting more than 48 hours). The situation was even worse in neglect cases: about 70 per cent of fatal or serious physical neglect cases went unreported, as did about three-quarters of the moderate physical neglect cases.

Few people fail to report abuse or neglect because they do not care about the endangered child. Instead, they may be unaware of the danger the child faces, or of the protective procedures that are available. A study

of non-reporting among teachers, for example, blamed their "lack of knowledge for detecting symptoms of child abuse and neglect".

Equally, few inappropriate or unfounded reports are deliberately false statements. Most involve an honest desire to protect children, coupled with confusion about what conditions are reportable.

Confusion about reporting is largely caused by the vagueness of reporting laws, aggravated by the failure of child protection agencies to provide realistic guidance about deciding to report. Thus, as a group of American experts concluded, "better public and professional materials are needed to obtain more appropriate reporting". The group specifically recommended that educational materials "should give specific information about what to report — and what not to report".

Distinguishing between reportable situations and those that are not is difficult, but current high rates of simultaneously under and over-reporting are unfair to the children and parents involved, and they threaten to undo much of the progress that has been made in building child protection programmes. A proper balance must be struck

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