

**Trends and Influential Factors in Child Abuse Reporting:  
Implications for Early Career School Counselors**

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## **Abstract**

This study used quantitative measures to explore child abuse reporting trends for early career school counselors and to examine factors influencing their decisions to report suspected child abuse. Thematic coding was used to analyze recommendations for additional training needs regarding child abuse reporting and for the challenges school counselors faced regarding mandated reporting. Participants completed online surveys to assess their experiences. Factors found to influence school counselors' decisions to report suspected child abuse included school counselors' self-efficacy levels, academic setting, and students' participation in the schools' free or reduced lunch program. Qualitative results were also reviewed.

*Keywords:* school counseling, child abuse, self-efficacy, training

## **Trends and Influential Factors in Child Abuse Reporting: Implications for Early Career School Counselors**

In 2015, child protective service (CPS) agencies received approximately 4 million reports of potential child abuse or neglect, involving roughly 7.2 million children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2017). After investigation, it is estimated that 683,000 children suffered from abuse and neglect in 2015 (National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, 2015; HHS, 2017). As in prior years, most of the reports involved neglect (75.3%) and physical abuse (17.2%) (National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, 2015). Estimates indicated that 1,670 children died of child abuse and neglect in the United States in 2015 (National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, 2015).

School counselors and other school personnel are in the position to act as the first line of defense in identifying, reporting, and preventing child abuse and neglect because of their daily interaction with students (Bryant, 2009; Bryant & Milsom, 2005; Sinanan, 2011). School counselors often have long-standing relationships with students and are familiar with the microsystems within a child's life, placing them in a unique position to address child abuse or neglect concerns (Bryant, 2009). School counselors are often delegated the responsibility of identifying and reporting students suffering from abuse or neglect in addition to providing counseling services to identified students, coordinating community resources, and designing prevention programs (Sikes, 2008). Although reform in social and federal policies may have contributed to shifts in child maltreatment trends (Institute of Medicine and Nation Research Council, 2012; Finkelhor, Saito, & Jones, 2018; Meyers, 2008: National Child Abuse and Neglect

Training and Publications Project, 2014), child abuse trends and reporting procedures within school systems should be further explored to promote continued downward progression and to streamline the process.

It is essential that school counselors recognize the signs of childhood abuse or neglect, are aware of reporting procedures, understand their role in the process, and advocate for child abuse prevention (Sikes, 2008). Lack of knowledge in these areas can result in devastating experiences for students (Lambie, 2005). Although some research has been done on school counselors' experiences with child abuse reporting (Bryant, 2009; Bryant & Baldwin, 2010; Bryant & Milsom, 2005; Tillman, Prazak, Burrier, Miller, & Benezra, 2016), little to no research has been conducted on early career school counselors' experiences with child abuse reporting. While all professional school counselors have an ethical obligation to report suspected abuse (Lambie, 2005), discrepancies and differences between state, district, and school protocols may make it difficult for early career school counselors to understand the reporting procedure upon entering a new school system (Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008; Hogelin, 2013). Understanding these inconsistencies and how they impact early career school counselors is important for designing professional development and training opportunities to address identified concerns.

### **History of Federal Laws**

In 1869, the Illinois Supreme Court indicated parents must exercise within the bounds of reason and humanity; if a parent commits cruelty upon a child, the law will punish him (Myers, 2008; Smith-Adcock & Tucker, 2016). Prior to 1875, children did not have a formalized protection agency (Myers, 2008). In the 1870's, child abuse captured

the attention of the nation with the news of an eight- year-old orphan named Mary Ellen Wilson (National Child Abuse and Neglect Training and Publications Project, 2014). Mary Ellen's father died in the Civil War and her mother disappeared. Her guardians lived in the worst tenement in Hell's Kitchen, a neighborhood of New York City (Myers, 2008). With no organization to protect abused children, Mary Ellen's plight fell into the hands of attorneys for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Myers, 2008). Mary Ellen's case outraged so many people that in 1874, the citizens of New York founded the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (Myers, 2008; Thomas, 1972). News of the organization spread and by 1922 approximately 300 nongovernmental child protective agencies were active across the United States (Myers, 2008; National Child Abuse and Neglect Training and Publications Project, 2014); however, many cities and rural areas still had no formal child protective services (Myers, 2008).

The Great Depression in the 1920's stimulated the federal government's role in social welfare and in 1935, as part of Roosevelt's New Deal, Congress passed the Social Security Act of 1935, which created Aid to Dependent Children. It identified child protective services as part of all public child welfare (Myers, 2008: National Child Abuse and Neglect Training and Publications Project, 2014). Congress assumed a leadership role in child protection when it signed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) on January 31, 1974 (Myer, 2008). CAPTA played a major role in shaping the nationwide system of governmental child protective services in place today and was most recently reauthorized by the CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010 (P.L. 11-320). Currently, all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Territories have child

abuse and neglect reporting laws mandating certain professionals and institutions to report suspected abuse to a CPS agency (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016a). Each state has its own definitions of child abuse and neglect that is based on standards defined by Federal and State laws (Institute of Medicine and Nation Research Council, 2012).

To help ensure the safety of children today, every state requires educators to be “mandated reporters” (Crosson-Tower, 2003). A mandated reporter is someone required by state law to report maltreatment to the designated state agency (Crosson-Tower, 2003). Mandated reporters are not required to have absolute proof of abuse, but only reasonable cause to suspect or believe a child has suffered from abuse (Bryant & Milsom, 2005). Because of the longstanding relationships educators have with students, they are often the individuals most likely to identify and report concerns to CPS agencies (Bryant & Milsom, 2005). In 2015, referrals to CPS came primarily from professionals who worked with children as part of their job; this population accounted for 63.4 percent of referrals made to CPS (HHS, 2017). School counselors, as members of a school’s faculty, are in a unique position to further identify students in need due to the therapeutic relationship (Bryant, 2009). School counselors, who often have long-term relationship with students, have knowledge of the student’s family, peers, and community group which promotes circumstances in which a student is much more likely to report incidents of abuse (Bryant, 2009).

### **School Counselor’s Role in Child Abuse Reporting**

It is important that school counselors understand their role in child abuse reporting, the policies of their school system, and the laws related to mandated

reporting. By law, school counselors are mandated to report suspected child maltreatment and abuse to provide information surrounding circumstances of suspected child abuse cases (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016a). The American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) ethical standards assert that school counselors should keep all information confidential unless legal requirements demand information be revealed or a breach is necessary to prevent serious and foreseeable harm to a student (ASCA, 2016). In addition, ASCA's (2015) position statement states:

It is the school counselor's legal, ethical and moral responsibility to report suspected cases of child abuse and neglect to the proper authorities. School counselors work to identify the behavioral, academic and social/emotional impact of abuse and neglect on students and ensure the necessary supports for students are in place (p. 7).

Based on the Child Abuse Prevention Act (CAPTA) of 1974, Public Law 93-246 and the ASCA (2015) position statement, school counselors should (a) report suspected abuse and neglect to proper authorities, (b) keep informed of current reporting requirements and state laws, and (c) commit themselves to become familiar with and abide by CPS laws within their state. School counselors who fail to report suspected cases of child abuse can be held criminally liable in most states; however, they are considered immune from criminal and/or civil lawsuits when they act in good faith as a mandated child abuse reporter (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016b; Sikes, 2008; Lambie, 2005; HHS, 2017).

School counselors commonly encounter cases of child abuse; however, they may struggle determining when to report suspected cases (Lambie, 2005). Although few studies have specifically examined school counselors' experiences with child abuse

reporting, recent studies have shown variation in findings. For example, Kenny and McEachern (2002) found that when presented with child abuse cases, most school counselors took appropriate action. Additionally, they found that the reasons school counselors failed to report suspected case included lack of physical evidence and lack of faith in CPS. In 2005, Bryant and Milsom again found that school counselors reported most of their child abuse cases, with physical abuse and neglect being reported more often than sexual abuse and emotional abuse. Reasons not to report included lack of evidence and concerns that CPS would not investigate the report (Bryant & Milsom, 2005), which mirrored the 2002 study by Kenny and Eachern. Then, in 2009, Bryant found factors influencing school counselors' decisions to report child abuse included, but were not limited to, the level of students (elementary, middle, or high school), socioeconomic status, and school setting (urban, suburban, and rural). Continuing research on this topic in 2016, Tillman et al. found that school counselors were more likely to suspect a defensive parent of abuse than cooperative or non-involved parents. Within the study, defensive was defined as school counselors not being "familiar with the parents and/or the parents are defensive in their interaction" with school counselors (Tillman et al., 2016, p.107). Additionally, Tillman et al. found that school counselors were more likely to report abuse reported by a child if there was observable physical evidence versus no physical evidence.

Although school counselors were found to typically take appropriate action, some influential factors may impact school counselors' decisions when reporting child abuse (Bryant & Milsom, 2005; Kenny & Eachern, 2009). School counselors must employ knowledge, skills, and ethical decision making to confidently and effectively address



cases of child abuse and neglect (ASCA, 2015; Lambie, 2005). School counselors may be viewed as a consultative expert in their buildings by staff members who have questions about child abuse (Bryant, 2009, Lambie, 2005). Furthermore, Bryant (2009) asserted that school counselors heavily rely on past professional experiences and collaboration with colleagues to obtain knowledge and skills related to child abuse and neglect reporting. School counselors who have limited experience, training, and/or fewer collaborative contacts, could be underdeveloped or unprepared for making informed decisions about complex child abuse cases (Bryant, 2009; Bryant & Baldwin, 2010; Tillman et al., 2016). Early career school counselors may be at a higher risk for struggling with these concerns due to their limited experience and lack of established support systems. Past research has shown that as an individual's knowledge or related training of child abuse increases, the levels of self-efficacy related to reporting or recognizing abuse increases as well (Balkaran, 2015; Jordan, MacKay, & Woods, 2017). Although school counselors' self-efficacy has not been linked to child abuse reporting in previous studies, research is needed in this area.

### **Purpose**

Although past studies focused on school counselors without regard to years of experience (Bryant, 2009; Bryant & Milsom, 2005), this current analysis was conducted to assess *early career* school counselors' knowledge of procedures and experiences with child abuse reporting. It is theorized that this segment of school counselors may have additional needs or concerns due to their limited experience with child abuse reporting. Extensive demographic variables of participants were assessed to determine their practices related to suspected child abuse reporting. These included years of

experience in education and school counseling, current and previous level of academic setting(s), school counselor-to-student ratio and percentage of students participating in free or reduced lunch programs. Specifically, the current mixed methods research study investigated (a) the prevalence of child abuse reporting for early career school counselors; (b) factors influencing early career school counselors' decision to report suspected child abuse; (c) reasons early career school counselors chose to report or not to report suspected child abuse; and (d) early career school counselors' levels of self-efficacy relative to child abuse reporting. Lastly, participants were given the opportunity to respond to two open-ended questions which asked about (a) additional training needs regarding child abuse reporting and (b) challenges they have faced when reporting suspected child abuse and neglect.

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

After receiving approval from an institutional review board, school counselors in the Southeastern United States region (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia) were recruited for participation in this study. Participants were recruited using an ASCA membership list, Alabama Counseling Association (ALCA) listserv, and LinkedIn. Additional state listservs were not targeted due to limited access by authors. Potential participants received an email requesting their participation in an online study examining the relationship between school counselors' self-efficacy levels and their experiences in child abuse reporting. All participants were informed that participation in the online study was voluntary and would take 10 to 15 minutes.

Participants were informed they could withdraw from the study at any time by closing the online survey and their information would remain anonymous. They were then asked to complete the online survey if they consented to participate. The email included the information letter, demographic measures, child abuse reporting questionnaire, school counselor self-efficacy scale, and knowledge of child abuse reporting questionnaire. Following data collection, all data were analyzed.

### **Participants**

For this study, early career counselor data were analyzed to assess their unique experience in child abuse reporting. Early career school counselors were defined as school counselors who had between 0 to 5 years of experience working as a school counselor within a public or private school. A total of 420 early career school counselors began the online survey. One hundred fifty surveys were excluded for failure to complete the entire study. Most participants ( $n = 232$ , 85.9%) reported being licensed as a school counselor. Descriptive information included participants' age, race/ethnicity, years in the education field, number of years in school counseling, whether the participant was currently working as a school counselor, the number of school counselors employed in the participants' current school setting, and the student to counselor ratio. Additional information collected included educational experiences, whether they were licensed as a school counselor, and if they graduated from a CACREP-accredited institution. The demographic questionnaire continued to assess the academic levels in which the participants were currently working, the academic setting, the number of students enrolled, and the percentage of students who participated in a free or reduced lunch program. Data are compiled in tables that can be

found in an Appendix at the end of this article. See Table A1 for a complete list of survey demographics. Extensive background information was obtained to assess the difference in reporting patterns among demographic categories.

## **Measures**

***Child Abuse Reporting Questionnaire.*** The Child Abuse Reporting Questionnaire (Bryant & Milsom, 2005) was developed to assess three domains: School Counselor General Information, Training in Child Abuse Reporting, and Child Abuse Reporting Experience. In the Training in Child Abuse Reporting section, participants were asked to rate their ability to assess the four different types of child abuse and to list where they obtained their knowledge of child abuse reporting. Additionally, the Child Abuse Reporting Experience section included two questions. The first question assessed participants' prevalence of child abuse reporting and asked for the number of suspected child abuse cases the participants encountered and the number of child abuse cases the participants reported. The second question assessed how many cases of suspected child abuse which the participants did not report. Participants were asked to indicate reasons for choosing not to report the suspected child abuse case based on 13 commonly reported barriers or to add other reasons for not reporting the suspected cases. Internal consistency measures were not obtained for this questionnaire because of the nature of the survey.

***School Counselor Self-Efficacy Scale.*** The School Counselor Self-Efficacy Scale (SCSE) was developed to assess school counselors' self- efficacy across settings and link personal attributes to career performance (Bodenhorn & Skagg, 2005). Participants in this study indicated their confidence in performing school counseling

tasks for 43 scale items. Ratings ranged from 1 (*not confident*) to 5 (*highly confident*). The coefficient alpha for the scale score was found to be 0.95 (Bodenhorn & Skaggs, 2005). The SCSE subscale include 5 domains of personal and social development (12 items); leadership and assessment (9 items); career and academic development (7 items); collaboration and consultation (11 items); and cultural acceptance (4 items). The correlations of the subscales ranged from 0.27 to 0.43.

***Knowledge of Child Abuse Reporting Questionnaire.*** This questionnaire was created and developed by the researchers for use within this study. The questionnaire was reviewed by the researchers and other counselor educators to determine if it clearly measured the constructs. A brief four-pronged questionnaire was developed to assess respondents' knowledge of child abuse reporting and procedures within four sections. The first section, Identifying Types of Abuse, assessed participants' perceptions of their ability to identify the four different types of child abuse. To complete this section, participants rated their comfort levels using a 4-point scale. Scores ranged from 1 (*very uncertain*) to 4 (*very certain*). The next section, Knowledge of Guidelines, assessed participants' knowledge of the state rules, ASCA ethical standards, and child abuse reporting protocol within their current school and district. To complete this section, participants rated their comfort levels using a 5-point scale. Scores ranged from 1 (*not knowledgeable*) to 5 (*extremely knowledgeable*). The third section, Child Abuse Training, assessed where participants received training on general knowledge of child abuse reporting, how to make a referral, and their understanding of indicators of child abuse. To complete this measure, participants selected options from a dropdown menu. The survey concluded with the following two open-ended questions: (a) "What types of

additional training do you need regarding child abuse reporting?” and (b) “What challenges did you or are you facing as a new school counselor (0-5) regarding mandated reporting?” Internal consistency measures were not obtained for this questionnaire because of the nature of the survey.

## **Analysis**

Data analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) statistical analyses program. A correlation analysis was used to assess the relationship across variables. Correlational analyses measure the strength of the relationship between two variables. A regression analysis was used to determine the relationship between school counselors' self-efficacy and either decision to report suspected child abuse cases. Lastly, ANOVAs were used to assess the relationship between the number of reported child abuse cases and the academic level (elementary, middle, high school), as well as the number of students participating the schools free or reduced lunch program.

A thematic analysis was conducted on the two qualitative open-ended questions assessing the participant's perceptions and experiences pertaining to training needs and challenges experienced in the process of reporting child abuse concerns. The primary and secondary authors of this study examined and coded the participants' responses from the open-ended questions. Additionally, the primary and secondary authors met to discuss their coding methods and rationale. Once coding agreement was met, the authors identified the emerging themes for each of the open-ended questions. After reaching consensus of the emerging themes, an external auditor reviewed the

codes and themes to ensure accuracy. The external author did not identify any discrepancies with the codes and themes.

## Results

### Surveys

Descriptive statistics of the child abuse survey included the number of participants ( $n = 266$ ) suspecting 1,684 cases of child abuse in the 2015-2016 school year. Four participants failed to provide responses to this item within the questionnaire. Scores ranged from 0 to 120 ( $M = 6.33$ ,  $SD = 10.37$ ). Participants indicated reporting 1,494 cases of child abuse with a range from 0 to 85 ( $M = 5.62$ ,  $SD = 7.63$ ). Physical child abuse cases ( $M = 3.21$ ,  $SD = 4.86$ ) were reported at a higher rate than neglect ( $M = 1.68$ ,  $SD = 2.89$ ), followed by emotional abuse cases ( $M = 0.53$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ), and sexual abuse cases ( $M = 0.53$ ,  $SD = .93$ ).

The relationship between the number of reported child abuse cases and demographic questions was examined using a bivariate correlation. Results indicated a negative correlation between the number of child abuse reports to the academic level of students the counselor works with (elementary, middle, or high school)  $r(264) = -0.22$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . A positive significant relationship was found between the number of reported child abuse cases and the number of students who participate in the schools free or reduced lunch program  $r(264) = 0.26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . No other significant relationships were found among the variables and the number of child abuse cases reported by school counselors.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the relationship between the academic level of students (elementary, middle and high school) the

school counselors work with and the number of child abuse cases reported. Results of the analysis showed a significant relationship among the variables  $f(2, 263) = 6.583$ ,  $p = 0.002$ . A follow-up test was used to evaluate pairwise differences among the means. Results of the Tukey HSD showed a significant difference between elementary ( $M = 7.18$ ) and high ( $M = 3.24$ ) school counselors who reported child abuse. No other significant differences were found between variables.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was also executed to assess the differences between child abuse reporting and the percentage (0-25%, 26-50%, 51-75%, 76-100%) of students who participate in a free or reduced lunch program. Results of the analysis showed a significant relationship among the variables  $f(3, 262) = 8.850$ ,  $p = 0.000$ . A Tukey HSD post hoc test was used to make a pairwise comparison. Statistically significant mean differences were found between the 0-25% group ( $M = 2.33$ ) and the above 75% group ( $M = 7.72$ ). No other significant differences were found between the groups.

On the Child Abuse Reporting Survey, participants were asked to indicate what factors influenced their decision to report child abuse ( $n = 270$ ). Participants indicated that the number one factor influencing their decision was following the law (professional obligation). Other reasons school counselors indicated that they reported child abuse included concern for safety of the child, school policy, the school counselor's relationship with the child, strong evidence that abuse had occurred, support of administration, potential for legal repercussion, effectiveness of CPS agency, possible repercussions at work, and the school relationship with the family. Participants also



indicated that they reported child abuse for other reasons. See Table A2 for influencing factors reporting percentages.

Further, participants indicated reasons why they chose not to report suspected child abuse. Participants specified inadequate evidence as the primary reason for not reporting suspected child abuse (16.7%,  $n = 45$ ). Other reasons cited included concern that CPS would not investigate (8.5%,  $n = 23$ ), afraid of repercussions against the child (6.3%,  $n = 17$ ), concern about damaging the therapeutic relationship (4.4%,  $n = 12$ ), directed not to report by principal (3%,  $n = 8$ ), felt a lack of support by administration (2.6%,  $n = 7$ ), fear of parental retaliation (1.9%,  $n = 5$ ), afraid of repercussions against the family (1.5%,  $n = 4$ ), thought someone else was reporting the abuse (1.5%,  $n = 4$ ), not wanting to break confidentiality (1.1%,  $n = 3$ ), fear of legal retaliation (1.1%,  $n = 3$ ), and unsure of the definitions of child abuse (1.1%,  $n = 3$ ). Participants also indicated that they chose not to reported child abuse for other reasons (17.4%,  $n = 47$ ).

The Knowledge of Child Abuse Reporting Questionnaire asked participants to rate how certain they feel about their abilities to identify types of abuse on a 4-point scale. Participants reported most confidence in their ability to identify physical abuse ( $M = 3.47$ ), followed by neglect ( $M = 3.2$ ), sexual abuse ( $M = 3.11$ ), and emotional abuse ( $M = 2.91$ ). When participants were asked where they gained knowledge about child abuse, most reporting receiving training from professional experiences (82.2%,  $n = 222$ ) and from university courses (74.1%,  $n = 200$ ). Research participants also indicated receiving training from mandated reporting training at school (63.3%,  $n = 171$ ), discussions with colleagues (62.6%,  $n = 169$ ), literature (59.6%,  $n = 161$ ), workshops (53.7%,  $n = 145$ ), and media (9.6%,  $n = 26$ ). Participants also indicated other avenues

for receiving information about child abuse (5.9%,  $n = 16$ ). Participants were asked where they received training regarding how to make a referral for a child abuse case. Most of the school counselors responded that they received the training from school/district training (67%,  $n = 181$ ), a university class (65.2%,  $n = 176$ ), or from a colleague (46.7%,  $n = 126$ ). Other responses included conference/workshop (36.3%,  $n = 98$ ), professional organization (23.3%,  $n = 63$ ), Department of Education website (16.7%,  $n = 45$ ), journal (7%,  $n = 19$ ), or other sources (7.8%,  $n = 21$ ). Lastly, early career school counselors were asked where they received training about the indicators of child abuse. Most of the respondents reported learning in a university/college course (82.6%,  $n = 223$ ), school/district training (63.3%,  $n = 171$ ), or conference/workshop (54.8%,  $n = 148$ ). Other responses included learning from a colleague (34.4%,  $n = 101$ ), professional organization (26.3%,  $n = 71$ ), journal (18.5%,  $n = 50$ ), Department of Education website (13%,  $n = 35$ ), and other sources (5.2%,  $n = 14$ ).

School counselors reported that 63.7% ( $n = 172$ ) of schools/districts provided them training on local abuse reporting policies for the participants' school. Therefore, 36.3% did not receive training from their local school system. Additionally, only 47% of school counselors reported their school/district as having a handbook/resource for school counselors outlining the steps for mandated reporting training within their school system ( $n = 127$ ). Fifty-three percent of school counselors reported not having a handbook/resource to reference the steps for mandated reporting ( $n = 143$ ).

A regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between school counselors' self-efficacy and their number of reported child abuse cases in the 2015-2016 school year. Less than one percent of the variance of school counselors' self-

efficacy was associated with the number of reported child abuse cases in the 2015-2016 school year. The results indicated no relationship between the variables,  $F(1, 264) = 1.781, p > 0.01$ . Further, a regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between school counselors' self-efficacy and their decision not to report suspicion of child abuse. About four percent of the variance ( $r^2 = 0.04$ ) of school counselors' self-efficacy was associated with the decision not to report child abuse suspicion. A significant correlation was found between the variables  $F(1, 257) = 10.05, p < 0.01$ .

Additionally, a regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between school counselors' self-efficacy and their certainty in identifying types of child abuse. Results showed the strength of the relationship is moderately related. Over 14% ( $r^2 = 0.143$ ) of the variance of the school counselors' self-efficacy level was associated with certainty in identifying child abuse. A significant correlation was found between the variables  $F(1, 268) = 45.802, p < 0.01$ .

### **Qualitative**

A thematic analysis of the two open-ended questions revealed nine themes and eight subthemes based on responses from 144 participants who identified as an early career school counselor; 26 participants failed to provide responses to the open-ended questions. The first open-ended question asked, *What types of additional training do you need regarding child abuse reporting?* Four themes and two subthemes emerged from the question regarding training recommendations: (a) types and signs of child abuse, (b) staff and faculty training, (c) reporting procedures, [subthemes of policy and procedure, and school and state policies], and (d) mandated reporter training. The second open-ended question asked, *What challenges did you or are you facing as a*

*new school counselor (0-5 years) regarding mandated reporting?* Five themes and six subthemes emerged from the research regarding challenges to child abuse reporting: (a) fear of repercussions, [subthemes of ethical guidelines, parents, and intimidation], (b) agency concerns and collaborations, (c) reporting policies, [subthemes of protocol, staff training, and administration], (d) identification of types of abuse, and (e) school counselor responsibilities. See Table A1 for open-ended questions, themes and subthemes, and example responses.

### **Discussion**

Results of the analysis showed that participants reported suspected child abuse cases approximately 90 percent of the time. Similar to other studies, physical abuse was reported the most frequently followed by neglect, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse (Bryant, 2009; Bryant & Milsom, 2005). This may be due to the fact that physical abuse is easier to identify because there are often visible markings, whereas other types of abuse are more difficult to identify because there are less visible indicators (Bryant & Milsom, 2005).

A significant difference in child abuse reporting cases was found between the elementary and high school levels, with elementary school counselors reporting child abuse at a higher rate. This result is similar to the findings of Bryant and Milsom in 2005. The similarity may be due to the nature of the job, with elementary school counselors possibly working more within the classroom because of being assigned less non-counseling duties than high school counselors (Chandler et al., 2018). Additionally, elementary students may be more likely to share abuse allegations with their teacher or school counselors than high school students who are more knowledgeable of child

abuse reporting (Bryant & Milsom, 2005). It is also important to note that a higher percentage of elementary school counselors responded to the survey than other school levels (middle or high school).

Higher percentages of child abuse reporting were found in schools with students who had high enrollment in the schools' free or reduced lunch programs. Historically poverty has been linked to higher prevalence of child abuse cases (Eckenrode, Smith, McCarthy, & Dineen, 2014). The Forth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) found physical abuse is two times more likely for a child with no parent in the labor force and neglect was four times more likely with children with an unemployed parent (Sedlak et al., 2010). Given these findings, school counselors need to educate themselves on the risk factors of poverty and how they relate to child abuse.

Results from this research study further described the factors most influencing a school counselor's decision to report suspected child abuse cases were: following the law (professional obligation); concern for the child's safety; following school policy; and the relationship the counselor has with the child. Surprisingly strong evidence and support from administration were cited as reasons for reporting less than 51 percent of the time. This may indicate school counselors' ethical obligations and concern for students most dictates their behavior.

When participants were questioned about reasons for not reporting, the most cited reason was not having enough evidence. The other two most cited reasons included concern that CPS would not investigate and fear of repercussions. This finding mirrors the finding above, highlighting that participants only rated "enough evidence to report" as a reason they reported suspected child abuse 50 percent of the time.

When participants were asked to rate their confidence in identifying types of child abuse, ratings showed moderately high confidence in recognizing physical abuse, moderate confidence in recognizing neglect, moderate confidence in recognizing sexual abuse, and less than certainty in identifying emotional abuse. Participants reported receiving training on identifying indicators of abuse mainly from a university/college course, school district training, or from a conference workshop. When asked specifically if school/districts provided training on local abuse reporting policies for participation, approximately 36 percent indicated not receiving district/school training. More than 50 percent of school counselors reported their district/school did not provide a handbook/resource for school counselors outlining the steps for mandated reporting in their school district.

The present study assessed school counselors' self-efficacy in relation to child abuse reporting. Although a relationship was not found between school counselor self-efficacy and the number of reported child abuse cases, a moderate relationship was found between school counselor self-efficacy and their certainty identifying types of abuse. This finding is consistent with past research that suggests school counselors' self-efficacy might impact their confidence in their skills and their ability to negotiate challenges within their workplace (Springer et al., 2015).

### **First Open-Ended Question**

Several themes were identified in the open-ended responses and highlighted areas participants identified and requested additional support and training to assist in their knowledge and skills in relation to reporting suspected child abuse. In the first open-ended question, four themes and two subthemes emerged from this line of inquiry:

(a) identification of the types and signs of child abuse, (b) staff and faculty training, (c) reporting procedures, and (d) mandated reporter training. See Table A3 for example responses for each theme.

**Identification of the types and signs of behavior.** This theme illustrates specific concern by participants for additional training in recognizing signs and types of abuse. Statements within this theme demonstrated a need for additional training on types of abuse that do not exhibit physical signs, such as emotional abuse and neglect. This is correlated with survey results that show that physical abuse was the most common type of abuse reported by the participants.

**Staff and faculty training.** In the second theme, school counselors indicated that school staff may need additional training on identifying types of abuse and reporting suspected abuse. This is consistent with current research showing teachers may struggle to report suspected child abuse and that school counselors are often looked at as a resource in this field (Goebbels, Nicholson, Walsh, & De Vries, 2008; Lambie, 2005; Crosson-Tower, 2003).

**Reporting procedures.** The third theme continues to show that school counselors are requesting additional training on reporting procedures, district policies, and how to respond when cases are not reported. These statements are consistent with the survey results which indicate that only about half of school counselors are receiving training from their school districts and many school counselors believe additional training is needed. Given these consistencies it is not surprising that two subthemes of “policy and procedures” and “school and state policies” emerged. Both of these

subthemes demonstrate the need for additional training providing specific information regarding school and state policies, as well as specific reporting procedures.

**Mandated reporter training.** Since all school personnel are mandated reporters, they are required to complete mandatory report training; however, participants in their responses indicated that additional training would inform them how to work more effectively with CPS, provide consistency among trainings, and provide best practices for school counselors. These requests may be a result of strained relationships between child abuse agencies and school counselors. Research shows many school counselors question services provided by child protection agencies and question whether reported cases would be addressed (Bryant & Milsom, 2005; Sikes, Remley, & Hays, 2010). Additional research is needed regarding how to improve these collaborative relationships.

### **Second Open-Ended Question**

The second open-ended question asked participants what challenges they have faced as a new school counselor regarding mandated reporting. The participants indicated several challenges which included 5 themes: (a) fear of repercussions, (b) agency concerns and collaboration, (c) reporting policies, (d) identification of the types of abuse, and (e) school counselor responsibilities. Addressing these challenges is essential for assisting early career school counselors navigate and overcome potential challenges. See Table A3 for example responses for each theme.

**Fear of repercussions.** The first theme illustrates school counselors' concerns with reporting suspected child abuse cases. Three subthemes emerged within this theme. The first subtheme, "ethical guidelines," denotes that school counselors struggle



with ethical guidelines when considering mandated reporting. This is again supported by the survey results that showed school counselors would like additional training in the mandated reporting process. Furthermore, subtheme two, “parents,” illustrated the concerns school counselors have about interacting with parents after making a referral to CPS. Likewise, subtheme three, “intimidation,” conveys the concerns school counselors have when working with administration, teachers, and colleagues after making a child abuse report. Some school counselors indicated a lack of support and pushback from administration. School counselors also indicated that teachers may also struggle with the reporting process. These findings echo earlier research findings that school counselors may not always be supported in their decision to report a suspected child abuse case, but that they must make a professional decision as to whether to report the case or not based on legal and ethical considerations (Sikes et al., 2010).

**Agency concerns and collaborations.** The next theme addressed school counselors’ concerns about making referrals to CPS and post reporting procedures. Some school counselors addressed concerns regarding CPS practices and found it difficult to communicate with them. This frustration could be due to the limits of confidentiality which restricts CPS and school counselors from collaborating without a release of information.

**Reporting policies.** In the third theme school counselors indicated concern about inconsistencies in reporting policies. Three subthemes emerged within this theme. In the first subtheme, “protocol,” school counselors addressed concerns about inconsistencies between state and local policies as well as inconsistencies among different schools. In the second subtheme, “staff training,” school counselors indicated

the need for additional training with school staff. The need for additional training is consistent with earlier findings which indicated that only about 50 percent of school counselors received training within their school. In the third subtheme, “administration,” school counselors shared their thoughts and experiences in relation to following the set expectations based on the protocols and policies set by the school district or school.

**Identifying types of abuse.** The fourth theme has been restated by participants throughout the survey. School counselors indicated challenges when identifying different types of abuse. This is consistent with other research which found that physical abuse may be easier to identify than other types of abuse (Bryant, 2009; Bryant & Milsom, 2005).

**School counselor responsibilities.** The last theme describes the challenges school counselors face when trying to maintain all their required work responsibilities. Some school counselors even admitted frustration around administration and other staff members not understanding their job responsibilities. School counselors often deal with role confusion and ambiguity in their school setting and, as a result, are often assigned non-counseling duties and support tasks (Chandler et al., 2018).

### **Limitations**

Although procedures were implemented to reduce confounding variables, the methodological design of the study may have impacted the validity of the findings. Although multiple avenues were used for collecting data (ASCA, Alabama Counseling Association Listserv, LinkedIn), only individuals who were exposed to the targeted organizations were exposed to the call for participants.

The online format may have also limited the users who were willing or able to respond to the survey. Some counselors may have felt uncomfortable and unwilling to share information about such a sensitive subject using an online platform. Likewise, participants may have elaborated more or provided more information if face-to-face interviews would have been utilized.

The self-reporting nature of the measures could also impact the validity of the study. Although participants were told their responses were anonymous, they may have answered in a socially acceptable manner for fear of repercussions. School counselors may be hesitant to admit that they suspected child abuse but failed to report it. Moreover, since school counselors were asked to recall information that occurred in the previous school year, their recollection may have been faulty which could impact the results of the assessment. Additionally, this study focused on a specific segment of the United States population (states that are included in the SACES organization region); therefore, results may vary in different regions of the United States. More research is needed to examine variations among regions.

### **Recommendations**

A reoccurring theme in the data collected was the need for additional training on the identification of all types of abuse. It is essential that school counselors work to become knowledgeable in all abuse indicators. Although, child abuse themes are covered in school counseling master's level courses, these courses alone are insufficient for training new school counselors on all types of indicators. School counselors could conduct independent research, complete mandated reporter trainings, and attend conferences to further their understanding of child abuse indicators.

Additionally, if a school counselor has a question about a suspected child abuse case, they could collaborate with other mental health professionals or CPS agencies.

Likewise, school counselors need to become well versed in mandated reporting protocol. New school counselors could complete all mandated reporting training required by their state and school as well as review their state's policies on mandated reporting guidelines. ASCA recognizes the responsibility of school counselors to become well versed in their position statement that says, "responsible action by the school counselor can be achieved through the recognition and understanding of the problem, knowing the reporting procedures and participating in available child abuse information programs" (ASCA, 2015, p. 7). Currently every state conceives their own definition of abuse as part of its child abuse legislation (Bryant & Milsom, 2005), so it is essential that school counselors review the standards within their state and adhere to these guidelines.

Additionally, school districts could work to provide annual mandated reporter training for school personnel who are considered mandated reporters. These trainings will help ensure that school personnel are aware of their responsibilities as mandated reporters, while concurrently informing attendees of local district/school policies on child abuse. Although research shows that educators may be reluctant to report every case of suspected child abuse (Goebbels et al., 2008), all school personnel are mandated reporters and must adhere to legal standards and local district policies (Bryant & Milsom, 2005). Establishing a strong working relationship with CPS and inviting them to participate in annual mandated reporter trainings may help ensure proper protocol is followed when child abuse is suspected, and it may reduce the anxiety of some

educators to report suspected cases. Schools and school districts could also work to establish a resources booklet for school mental health professionals that includes, but is not limited to, a description of each educator's role in addressing suspected child abuse, identification of the designated reporters (if required by school policy), required documentation procedures, and guidance regarding how to address common issues/questions (Lambie, 2005). It is essential for proper protocol that all school personnel have a knowledge base about abuse and be familiar with the school's procedure for addressing incidents of abuse (Lambie, 2005). All school personnel must be familiar with the signs of abuse and know the proper procedural protocols for reporting incidents of abuse at their local school and state levels.

Further research needs to be conducted to investigate trends in school counselors' child abuse reporting as well as factors influencing school counselors' decisions to report or not report suspected child abuse. These decisions have a direct impact on students' well-being. Information obtained can assist in better preparing school counselors for identifying and reporting suspected child abuse cases.

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## Appendix

**Table A1**

*Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants*

Characteristics	Frequency ( <i>n</i> )	Percentage
<i>Race/Ethnicity (N = 270)</i>		
Caucasian	222	82.2
African American	33	12.2
American Indian or Alaska Native	4	1.5
Asian	1	<1
Other	9	3.3
Unknown	1	<1
<i>Age (N = 270)</i>		
18-24	7	2.6
25-34	146	54.1
35-44	74	27.4
45-54	33	12.2
55-64	10	3.7
<i>CACREP Training (N = 270)</i>		
CACREP	213	78.9
Non-CACREP	57	21.2
<i>Years of Experience in Education (N = 270)</i>		
0 to 5 years	142	52.6
6 to 10 years	50	18.5
11 to 20 years	66	24.4
More than 20 years	12	4.4
<i>School Level (N = 270)</i>		
Elementary (K-5th grades)	134	49.6
Middle (6th-8th grades)	68	25.2
High (9th-12th grades)	68	25.2
<i>Location Setting (N = 270)</i>		
Urban	57	21.1
Suburban	109	40.4
Rural	104	38.5

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Frequency (n)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<i>Number of School Counselors in Academic Setting (N = 270)</i>		
1	127	47
2	68	25.2
3	39	14.4
4	13	4.8
5	8	3
6	6	2.2
>6	5	1.9
<i>Student to Counselor Ratio (N = 270)</i>		
0-250	41	15.2
251-300	38	14.1
301-350	20	7.4
351-400	33	12.2
401-450	31	11.5
451-500	31	11.5
501-550	23	8.5
551-600	9	3.3
>600	44	16.3

**Table A2***Factors Influencing Child Abuse Reporting*

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Frequency (n)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Participants (N = 270)		
Professional Obligation	234	86.7
Concern for Safety of the Child	191	70.7
Following School Policy	175	64.8
School Counselor's Relationship with the Child	154	57
Strong Evidence	137	50.7
Support of Administration	113	41.9
Potential Legal Repercussion	61	22.6
Effectiveness of CPS	46	17
Possible Repercussions at Work	28	10.4
The School Relationship with the Family	18	6.7
Other Reasons	28	10.4

**Table A3***Open-Ended Questions, Themes, and Responses*

<b>Open-Ended Questions</b>	<b>Themes and Subthemes</b>	<b>Examples of Responses</b>
What types of additional training do you need regarding child abuse reporting?	Identify types and signs of child abuse	<i>I think more training is useful for the gray areas of child abuse. We all know what physical and sexual abuse are, but neglect and emotional abuse are harder to define.</i>
	Staff and Faculty training	<i>I would love it if my district offered more warning training for teachers on warning signs and what to look for.</i>
	Reporting procedures	<i>How to file a report</i>
	(a) Policy and procedure	<i>School wide policy training</i>
	(b) School and state policies	<i>The fine lines between appropriate discipline and physical abuse per state</i>
What challenges did you or are you facing as a new school counselor (0-5 years) regarding mandated reporting?	Mandated reporter training	<i>I want DHR and schools to hear the same training about Mandatory Reporting. Many times DHR thinks that we are getting training that we are not</i>
	Fear of Repercussions	
	(a) Ethical guidelines	<i>Making the legal and ethical decision on reporting. Then after making the report we don't know whether the child has been safe due to the confidentiality process.</i>
	(b) Parents	<i>Slightly nervous parents will find out I am the one who reported them.</i>
	(c) Intimidation	<i>Lack of support from administrators. There is a fear of reporting from staff (and even myself) that is sometimes hard to overcome</i>
	Agency concerns and collaborations	<i>The CPS agency in my county does not protect their reporters. I report anonymously, but they still tell parents that I was the reporter.</i>

Open-Ended Questions	Themes and Subthemes	Examples of Responses
	Reporting Policies	<i>Inconsistencies between the law and the school policy (who should be aware of the report)</i>
	(a) Protocol	<i>Every 'training' I've been to, even led by an agency, never teaches how to report.</i>
	(b) Staff Training	<i>My biggest challenge is educating my colleagues about reporting.</i>
	(c) Administration	<i>The school policy requires me to tell an administrator makes me uncomfortable.</i>
	Identifying Types of Abuse	<i>What is considered a reportable offense</i>
	School Counselor Responsibilities	<i>Understanding my role after the report is made</i>