



# Keeping Children Safe

## Afterschool Staff and Mandated Child Maltreatment Reporting

by Maria Gandarilla and Julie O'Donnell

Every year, an estimated 3.4 million referrals alleging abuse or neglect to children are made in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). In 2011, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2012) reported that, of the 3.4 million referrals made, about 18.5% were substantiated, or determined to be actual maltreatment. Abuse is defined by the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (1974) as “physical or mental injury, sexual abuse, negligent treatment, or maltreatment of a child” (Section 5106).

With 8.4 million children in the U.S. spending an average of eight hours a week in afterschool programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2009), afterschool providers are an important part of the network of caring adults who can help to keep children safe. In addition, afterschool staff are “mandated reporters.” Whether or not the laws specifically mention afterschool staff, every state re-

quires people whose employment puts them in contact with children to report suspected child abuse or neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2010). The close relationships that staff, children, and families often form in afterschool programs make it quite possible that children will disclose maltreatment or that staff will identify maltreatment warning signs (Friedman, 2007a). However, it is not clear that afterschool staff understand their responsibility to report this information to authorities.

No research on mandated reporting of child maltreatment by afterschool staff has been published.

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Studies in the distinct but related field of child care suggest that child care workers report maltreatment at lower rates than other mandated reporters (Hagen, 2000; McKenna, 2010). In 2011, child care providers made less than one percent of all professional child maltreatment reports nationwide (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

To begin to understand reporting of suspected child maltreatment by afterschool staff, we surveyed staff in a large California afterschool program about their knowledge of child maltreatment and mandated reporting. We also asked about their training in this area and about the factors that might influence their decision to report suspected abuse or neglect. Our results suggest that further training may be necessary to help afterschool providers understand their responsibility to report and the process of making a report.

### **The Unique Position of Afterschool Providers**

Friedman (2007a) suggests that afterschool staff can play a vital role in identifying child maltreatment. Children spend a substantial amount of time with afterschool staff, often forming significant positive relationships (Hall, Williams, & Daniel, 2010; Huang et al., 2007; Rhodes, 2004). Hall and colleagues (2010) found that students believed afterschool staff genuinely cared about them and wanted them to do their best. Rhodes (2004) notes that youth see afterschool staff frequently and “thus have increased opportunities for relationship formation and spontaneous disclosure” (p. 147).

Afterschool staff also develop positive relationships with parents—relationships that parents may not share with school staff (Afterschool Alliance, 2008). In one study (Hall et al., 2010), afterschool staff reported that building rapport with parents was an important component of their jobs. The parents said that they respected staff members because they acted as a liaison between the school and the family (Hall et al., 2010).

These bonds put afterschool staff in a prime position to observe signs or hear disclosures of abuse and neglect (Friedman, 2007a; Friedman, 2007b; Rhodes,

2004). In programs that incorporate positive youth development practices, where safety and supportive relationships are integral to the approach (Community Network for Youth Development, 2001), disclosure may be particularly likely.

### **Child Maltreatment and Mandated Reporting**

In California, where we conducted our study, the Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act (1963) delineates who is considered a mandated reporter, the types of reportable abuse, and guidelines for reporting and dealing with abuse. Reportable maltreatment includes physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglect. When mandated reporters suspect child maltreatment, they are required to make a phone report as soon as possible, followed by a written report within 36 hours. Mandated reporters receive immunity when reporting in good faith. Consequences including fines and jail time deter them from failing to report.

During 2011, mandated reporters made over half (57.6%) of child maltreatment reports in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). However, research suggests that mandated reporters do not always report when they suspect maltreatment (Gunn, Hickson, & Cooper, 2005; Kenny, 2001; Webster, O’Toole, O’Toole, & Lucal, 2005). VanBergeijk (2007) found that, during their careers, school staff reported only about 64% of the cases they had suspected; one-fourth had failed to report suspected child maltreatment.

### **Factors Limiting Child Maltreatment Reporting**

Several factors have been shown to reduce the rates at which maltreatment is reported. One is limited knowledge either of the signs of maltreatment or of reporting laws and procedures (Flaherty, Jones, & Sege, 2004; Kenny, 2004). Research using vignettes of maltreatment episodes shows that some mandated reporters say they would not report even when the incidents clearly describe maltreatment (Kenny & McEachern, 2002; Webster et al., 2005).

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Another barrier to reporting suspected maltreatment is fear of making an inaccurate report (Kenny, 2001; Vulliamy & Sullivan, 2000). Kenny (2001) found that 60 percent of teachers who had failed to report indicated that this fear was a factor. The belief that an inaccurate report would negatively affect the child and family is another barrier (Jones et al., 2008). Mandated reporters may also fear that making a report will impair their relationship with the child and family (Flaherty et al., 2004; Vulliamy & Sullivan, 2000, Webster et al., 2005). Other reasons include concern for the trauma that the child and family would face during the investigation of an unfounded report and the potential loss of the family as a client (Jones et al., 2008).

Negative perceptions of child protection agencies may also reduce the likelihood that suspected maltreatment will be reported (Flaherty et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2008; Kenny, 2004). In one study, pediatricians who failed to report identified negative experiences with child service agencies as a decisive factor (Gunn et al., 2005). Mandated reporters have also cited the belief that their organization could provide resources or treatment to address the abuse as a reason not to report (Strozier et al., 2005; Svensson & Janson, 2008).

### **Training of Mandated Reporters**

Training requirements for mandated reporters vary by state. California law strongly encourages employers to provide training on identifying and reporting child maltreatment, but school districts are the only employers actually required to provide training. The training suggested by California law often covers legal mandates, with a focus on the types of reportable maltreatment, their signs and symptoms, and the child abuse reporting process (Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act, 1963). Mandated reporter training may take place online or in person; it often combines lecture and vignettes (Hawkins & McCallum, 2001; Kenny, 2007; Reiniger, Robison, & McHugh, 1995).

Research suggests that training does improve participants' knowledge of child maltreatment (Starling, Heisler, Paulson, & Youmans, 2009). However, findings are mixed on whether training results in higher levels of reporting (Fraser, Mathews, Walsh, Chen, & Dunne, 2010; Hawkins & McCallum, 2001; McKenna, 2010). Multiple studies have concluded that mandated reporters would benefit from additional training that addresses the definitions and forms of child maltreatment, reporting procedures, legal issues, and interactions with clients after a report is made (Flaherty et al., 2004; Kenny, 2007; Smith, 2006).

**Table 1. Study Sample**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Percentage (N = 71)</b>
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	62.0%
Male	35.2%
Not reported	2.8%
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
Latino/Hispanic	39.4%
African American	19.7%
Asian/Pacific Islander	15.5%
White/Caucasian	9.9%
Multiracial	4.2%
Other	4.2%
Not reported	7.0%
<b>Staff Position</b>	
Direct line staff/team leader	83.1%
Supervisory staff	11.2%
Not reported	5.6%
<b>Education</b>	
High school graduate	11.3%
Some college	52.1%
Bachelor's degree	31.0%
Master's degree	2.8%
Not reported	2.8%
<b>Length of Employment in Afterschool</b>	
Less than a year	35.2%
1–2 years	22.5%
More than 2 years	23.9%
Not reported	18.3%
<b>Number of Child Abuse Reports Made</b>	
None	73.2%
One	18.3%
Two	4.2%
Three or more	4.2%

## Studying Mandated Reporters in an Afterschool Program

This study used a self-administered survey to investigate afterschool staff's knowledge of mandated reporting of child maltreatment and the factors that would influence their decision to report. With approval of a university institutional review board, surveys were distributed to afterschool staff during two staff meetings at an urban youth-serving nonprofit organization in Southern California. The survey took about 10 minutes to complete. The response rate was 86 percent.

### Sample

The sample was composed of 71 afterschool staff members. As shown in Table 1, the majority were female. The largest proportion of participants described themselves as Latino. About 86 percent had some college education or a degree. Most were employed as team leaders; that is, they were direct line staff. Length of employment in afterschool ranged from one month to nine years, with an average of 22 months. About one-third of respondents had worked in the field less than a year. Nineteen, or 27 percent, had made a child maltreatment report. Of those, 68 percent had reported only once.

### Instruments

Our survey included questions from the Educators and Child Abuse Questionnaire (Kenny, 2000), modified for this population with permission from the author. The first section assessed what respondents had learned from mandated reporter training. On a four-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," participants responded to such prompts as "Have you ever received mandated reporter training?" and "Based on this training, I am able to recognize signs of physical abuse." Participants were also asked to rank "To what extent would the following factors influence your decision whether or not to report?" Factors included, for example, "Knowing parents and feeling they are motivated for treatment and remorseful" and "Feeling as though [the child and family service agency] does not generally offer help to maltreated children."

The second part examined respondents' ability to recognize child abuse and neglect. Participants were also asked to identify what they would do in response to two vignettes depicting physical abuse and neglect. Here is one of the vignettes:

During recreation, Ethan, an eight-year-old student, says to you that he cannot participate in the team activity because his hand and feet hurt. Upon closer

inspection, you notice several round burns on Ethan's palm. When you ask Ethan about the burns, he simply states that his mother told him he was bad for not finishing his food.

The other vignette described neglect rather than physical abuse: Young children have been left alone at night, and a child reports that there has been no food in the house for several days. For both vignettes, possible responses included reporting to the authorities (police), reporting to child protection services, waiting for clearer evidence of abuse, speaking to parents or caregivers, and taking no action.

We also created an 11-item questionnaire measuring factual knowledge of California mandated reporting laws. The true-false questions included "Reasonable suspicion is sufficient for a mandated reporter to make a child maltreatment report" and "Failure to report child abuse by a mandated reporter can result in 6 months in county jail and/or a \$1,000 fine." The number of items answered correctly were added together to create a knowledge scale.

### Analysis

Comparisons of knowledge with the factors related to reporting, training experience, and position type were completed using independent *t*-tests and chi square analyses. Results are reported at the .05 and .10 significance level.

## Survey Results

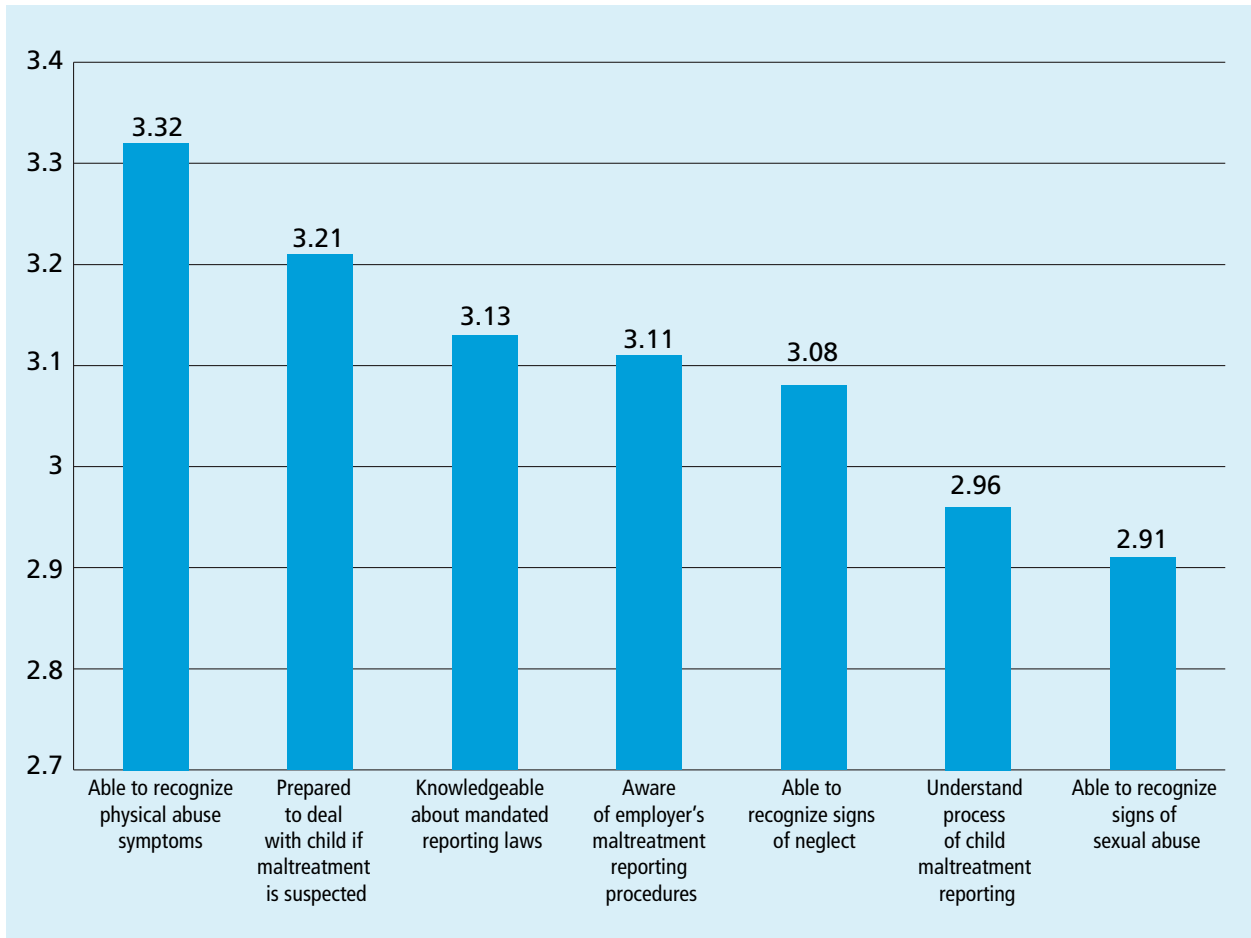
Our findings are presented here, with implications following in the next section.

### Knowledge About Mandated Reporting

Of the 71 survey respondents, 15, or 21 percent, had never received mandated reporter training; 49 percent had received training only from an employer; 10 percent had received training only as part of their educational programs; and 20 percent had received training both in school and at work.

Figure 1 displays respondents' perceptions of the competence and knowledge they gained from training on child maltreatment and reporting. The highest levels of competence reported were in recognizing signs of physical abuse and being prepared to deal with a child if maltreatment was suspected. The lowest were in recognizing the signs of sexual abuse and understanding the process of making a child abuse report. The vast majority of respondents (89 percent) reported that they wanted more training.

**Figure 1. Knowledge Gained from Training (N = 48)**



Scores on the reporting knowledge scale ranged from 3 to 10 out of 11, with an average score of 7.14. As shown in Table 2, almost all staff knew they were responsible for reporting suspected maltreatment and most knew that reasonable suspicion was sufficient for making a report. However, about 80 percent did not know how soon they needed to make a report. More than half did not know the consequences of failure to report or that they were immune from liability. About one-third did not know they were mandated to report reasonable suspicions even if their supervisor disagreed or that they could not be reprimanded by their employer for reporting suspected maltreatment. There were no significant differences in knowledge between staff who had and had not received training or between supervisors and line staff.

In response to the physical abuse vignette, about 81 percent of respondents indicated they would report to child protective services or to the authorities. For the neglect vignette, 70 percent said they would report. In response to both vignettes, the next most popular response was speaking to the parents or caregivers about their suspicions. For the physical abuse vignette, 12 percent said

they would speak to parents, while 6 percent said they would wait for more signs of abuse. In the neglect situation, 20 percent would speak to parents and 11 percent would wait for evidence. Again, there were no significant differences between staff who had and had not been trained or between supervisors and line staff.

### **Factors Influencing the Decision to Report**

Participants were asked to rate the extent to which factors might influence their decision to report suspected maltreatment. As shown in Figure 2, being unsure of whether actual maltreatment happened was the highest-rated factor, followed by anticipating unpleasant consequences and fear of making an inaccurate report. Feeling as though reporting was not their job and not wanting to appear foolish were the lowest-rated factors. None of the factors reached a score of 2 on the four-point scale, meaning that, on average, no factor was very likely to influence the decision.

Analyses were run to explore whether these factors differed by training experience. As shown in Figure 3, participants who had received training were significantly more likely than those without training to say that their

**Table 2. Knowledge of Mandated Reporting Laws**

Question	Respondents (N = 71) answering correctly
As a mandated reporter, I am legally responsible for reporting child maltreatment when I suspect it.	97%
Reasonable suspicion is sufficient for a mandated reporter to make a child maltreatment report.	87%
Physical and sexual abuse are the only types of reportable maltreatment.	86%
Failure to report child abuse by a mandated reporter can result in 6 months in county jail and/or a \$1,000 fine.	72%
When filing a child abuse report, a mandated reporter must make a phone call but a written report is optional.	69%
If, as a mandated reporter, I suspect child abuse, but my supervisor says I should not report, I am not breaking the law.	69%
I can be reprimanded by my employer if I report suspected maltreatment if my supervisor tells me not to do so.	69%
Under California law, spanking a child with an open hand on the buttocks is an acceptable form of discipline.	55%
If I report abuse, I am immune from liability.	48%
Failure to report child maltreatment can result in mandatory state-required training.	42%
A mandated reporter has 48 hours between the time child maltreatment is suspected and the time it must be reported.	20%

decision to report would be influenced by the belief that the child protection agency does not help children or that reporting brings only negative consequences for the child and family. Those who had received training were also significantly more likely to be influenced by their feeling that the parents were remorseful and motivated for treatment. Participants with training were also somewhat more likely to report fear of making an inaccurate report and not wanting to appear foolish.

### What the Results Mean

Our findings suggest that staff need to be more fully informed about child maltreatment, their responsibility to report, and how to make a report.

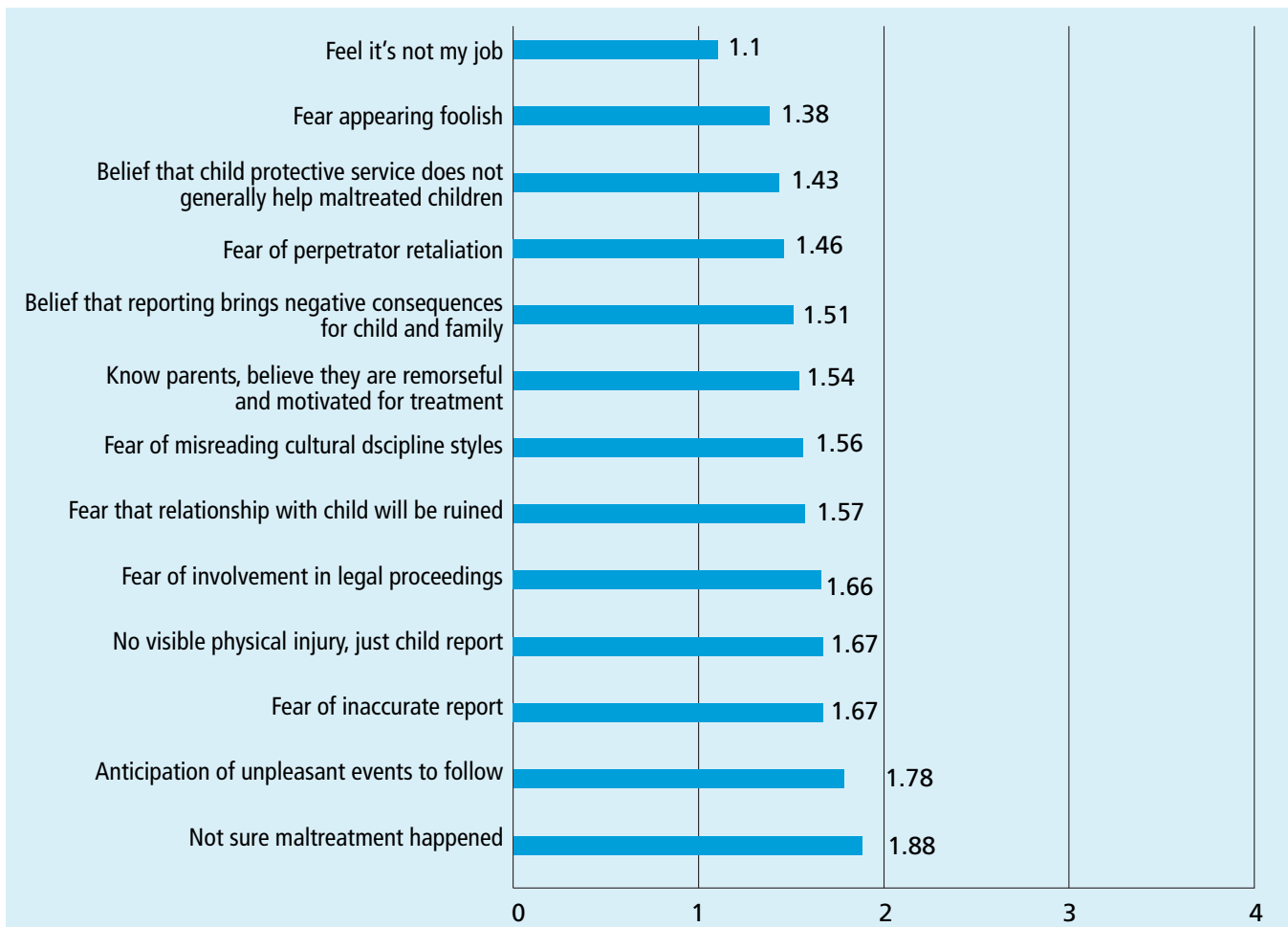
### What Staff Need to Know About Mandated Reporting

Staff answered an average of 64 percent of the questions on mandated reporting laws correctly. Eighty percent in-

correctly thought that they had 48 hours to report suspected abuse. More than half believed that a consequence for failing to report abuse was training; a similar percentage were unaware that reporters are immune from liability. If these results hold true for other afterschool staff, additional training may be necessary, particularly on the timeline to report, potential consequences of failure to report, and protections for mandated reporters.

Analysis of responses to the vignettes suggest that afterschool staff may find neglect more challenging to identify than physical abuse, or perhaps they believe it is less harmful. This finding is troubling in light of the fact that neglect is the cause of 71 percent of maltreatment-related fatalities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Training for afterschool staff should cover the warning signs of all types of maltreatment, including sexual abuse, as knowledge of this form of maltreatment was lacking even after training.

**Figure 2. Factors Influencing Decision to Report (N = 70)**

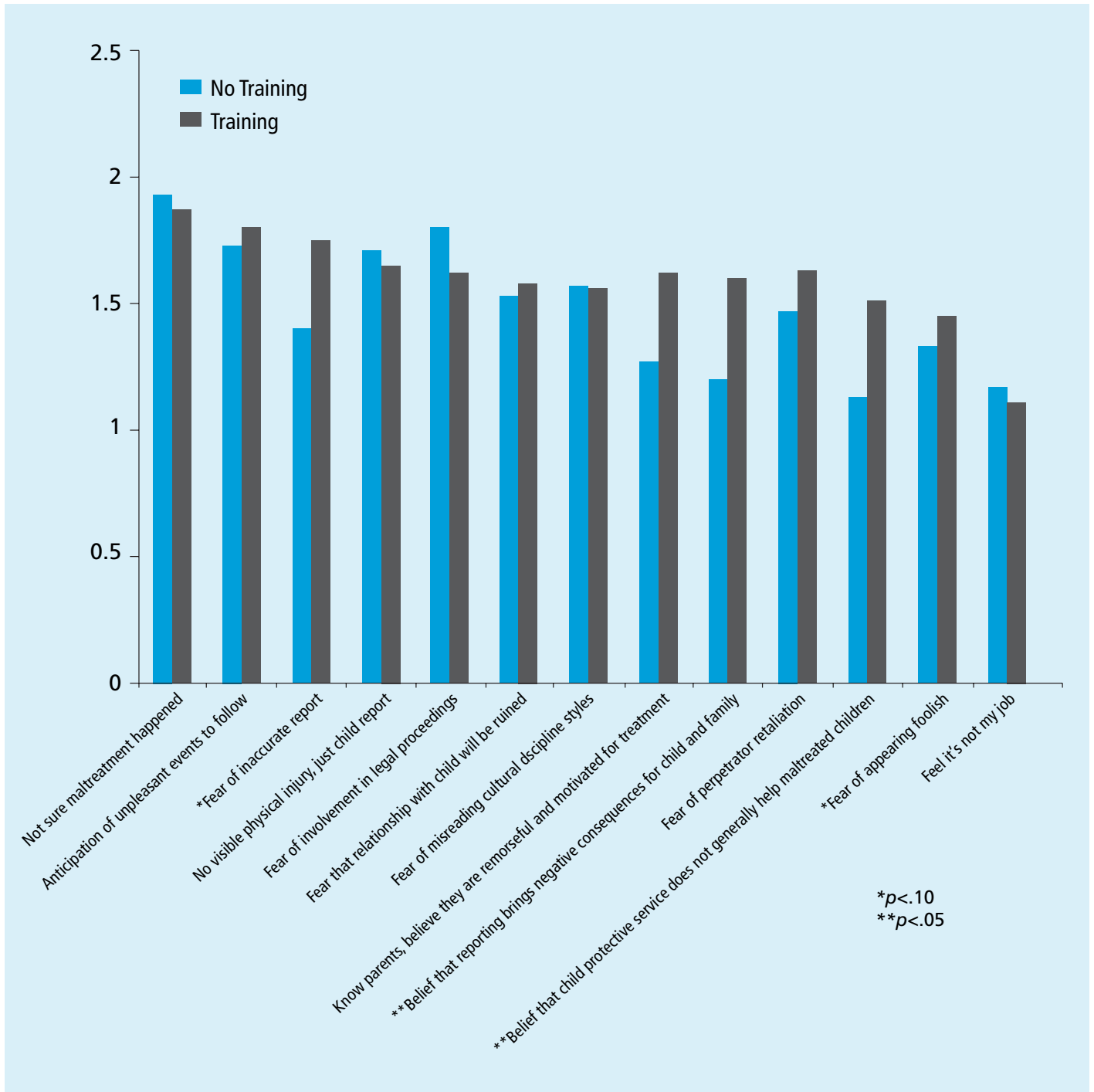


The fact that 20 percent of respondents said they would talk to the parent about their concerns rather than report neglect might not be unexpected given the close relationships afterschool staff often develop with families. However, disclosing maltreatment suspicions to parents can have negative consequences including withdrawal from the program, pressure on the child to recant, and increased danger to the child (Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, Children's Bureau, Karageorge, & Kendall, 2008). Training should cover these consequences and offer staff strategies for dealing with children and families when they feel a report must be made. For example, under California law, afterschool staff may decide to tell the family they are making a report if they believe this disclosure will not put the child at further risk or hinder the investigation (Gil & California Department of Social Services, Office of Child Abuse Prevention, 2005). Staff should know—and may communicate to families—that only child protective service workers, not mandated reporters or their supervisors, are legally responsible for investigating to determine whether maltreatment has occurred.

Staff who had been trained believed that training had prepared them to identify physical abuse and to deal with children who disclosed maltreatment. Participants also said that training made them knowledgeable about mandated reporting laws and their employer's procedures for reporting. This finding is encouraging, because mandated reporters are not always aware of their employers' reporting procedures (Gunn et al., 2005; Kenny, 2004). However, most participants still did not understand the state mandated process of reporting, and the vast majority wanted further training. Thus, training may need to be more comprehensive and to delineate more clearly the steps of the reporting process.

Although staff who had received mandated reporter training said it increased their knowledge, their actual performance on the factual questionnaire was no different from the performance of those who had not been trained, nor were trained staff more likely to say they would report the maltreatment in the vignettes. Hawkins and McCallum (2001) also found that training did not make a difference in the likelihood that participants would identify and re-

**Figure 3. Training Differences in Factors Related to Decision to Report**



port physical abuse or neglect described in vignettes. These findings could be a result of the extent or quality of training participants received, or perhaps the training was inadequate or was not tailored to the afterschool environment. The fact that supervisors did not demonstrate more knowledge of child maltreatment reporting than line staff suggests that afterschool programs will need to bring in trainers with expertise in this area.

### **How Staff Decide Whether to Report**

The findings on factors that influence staff members' decision to report reinforce our suggestions about training topics. Although none of the factors was rated even "somewhat" influential in the decision to report, the highest-rated factors were being unsure that maltreatment had happened and anticipating unpleasant consequences. Thus, training may need to focus on maltreat-



ment indicators, on what happens after a report is made, and on potential consequences of failure to report—for both children and staff.

Other studies (Gunn et al., 2005; Kenny, 2001; Kenny & McEachern, 2002; Strozier et al., 2005) have found that the belief that child protective agencies do not help children influenced mandated reporters' decisions. Participants in our study, however, rated that factor third lowest. One reason may be that only about 27 percent had made a child abuse report. As a group, they may not have had much interaction with child protective services or experienced the frustrations noted elsewhere.

Other factors commonly reported in previous studies (Flaherty et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2008; Webster et al., 2005)—fear that relationships with children would be ruined or that reporting would bring negative consequences for the family and child—were less influential for participants in this study. This finding is encouraging in light of research indicating that afterschool staffers establish positive, meaningful relationships with children and families. Perhaps these close relationships make afterschool staff more likely to report possible maltreatment. Afterschool staff may be more likely than some other mandated reporters to understand that positive youth development cannot occur unless children are in safe environments.

Participants who had received training were more likely to believe that child protective agencies do not generally help children and that reporting abuse brings only negative consequences for the child and family. This finding is troubling, because these factors have been shown to decrease the likelihood that people will report suspected maltreatment (Flaherty et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2008; Kenny & McEachern, 2002; Strozier et al., 2005). Another factor that was rated more highly by trained staff was feeling that parents were remorseful and motivated for treatment. Perhaps training should integrate more content on the supports and services children and families can receive after a report is made. Afterschool staff also need to understand that remorse alone may not be sufficient to stop maltreatment.

## Implications for Afterschool Administrators

Our study found that afterschool staff, both line staff and supervisors, lacked sufficient knowledge about certain forms of child maltreatment and about reporting laws. Afterschool staff need access to comprehensive information and training that address the potential barriers to reporting found in this study and in the literature. The inclusion of vignettes in training may help determine whether the training actually results in an increased ability to recognize reportable maltreatment. Training should be provided to all afterschool staff when they are hired, with refresher training every year. Furthermore, staff may benefit from being frequently reminded of the law regarding mandated reporting through such means as posters in the workplace. Supervisors—who, according to our study, may be no more knowledgeable than line staff—may require specialized training to enable them to answer staff questions or provide guidance when maltreatment is suspected.

Afterschool programs might collaborate with child protective or social service agencies to train staff. Having social workers provide the training and serve as consultants may help staff develop more confidence in the child welfare system, understand how the decision to investigate is made, and know what supportive services are available to families. Social workers have the expertise to train supervisors so that they are prepared to support their line staff. They can also help afterschool staff develop strategies to deal effectively with families and

maintain relationships after a report has been made.

Although this study is one of the first to explore the knowledge and perceptions of afterschool staff related to mandated reporting, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. Our study used a convenience sample from a single agency, so results may not be generalizable. We could not determine the extent, type, or quality of the training participants had received. Our survey, although it was adapted from other studies, was not field tested with afterschool staff to ensure that questions were not open to interpretation. Additional research exploring the relationship between training and reporting would prove beneficial to afterschool providers and the children they serve.

Having social workers provide the training and serve as consultants may help staff develop more confidence in the child welfare system, understand how the decision to investigate is made, and know what supportive services are available to families.

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