State-Sponsored Mandated Reporter Training: An Analysis of the Curriculum

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Child abuse and neglect is a public health epidemic that is associated with significant negative effects for children as well as their families and society at large (Stoltenborgh et al., 2015). Since the 1960s, mandated reporting laws have been passed requiring key professionals who suspect child maltreatment to inform the appropriate authorities. In this way, mandated reporters play a vital role in prevention and intervention, identifying the majority of substantiated cases of child maltreatment (United States Department of Health and Human Services [US DHHS], 2021). However, child maltreatment is still under-reported and many mandated reporters do not report known and suspected cases. This is partly because child maltreatment is a complex phenomenon that has legal, medical, social, and behavioral elements. In addition, different forms of child maltreatment have different definitions, manifestations, indicators, and types of associated harm. Thus, to be effective in discharging their duties and protecting children, mandated reporters require proper education and training to develop cognitive knowledge and appropriate affective dispositions.
However, research consistently finds that professionals feel they have not had sufficient training about essential domains including the indicators of different types of child abuse and neglect, the nature and scope of the reporting duty, and how to comply with the duty (e.g., Kenny, 2004; Mathews, 2011; Hawkins & McCallum, 2001).

**Current Study**

The current study was designed to examine the content of training for mandated reporters in U.S. state-sponsored online training curricula to identify key gaps and areas for improvement. To do this, we conducted a deductive qualitative content analysis of documents using publicly available electronic data (Krippendorff & Bock, 2008; Walsh et al., 2013). The trainings were located through an electronic search, allowing for the harvesting and analysis of comparable data across states. In all, 44 state-sponsored mandated reporter curricula were accessed. A coding and evaluation matrix was created based on a review of the literature and consultation with experts in the field. We identified ten thematic domains informed by theory and research about the required elements of mandated reporter training (Carter et al., 2006; Hawkins & McCallum, 2001; Mathews, 2015; Mathews, 2017; Rheingold et al., 2015; Smeekens et al., 2011). Each curriculum was coded for each variable dichotomously and independently by two of the authors, with 93.6% percent agreement (kappa=.83). All differences were resolved through discussion between the two coders.

### Table 1. Proportion of curricula that covered each topic.

**Theme 1: Reporting Legalities**
- Who is a mandated reporter (100%)
- Failure to report is a crime (77.3%)
- Laws to protect tribal status (18.2%)
- Reporting is confidential (84.1%)
- Immunity for good faith reporting (86.4%)
- Criminal penalties for not reporting (27.3%)
- Licensure penalties for not reporting (25.9%)
- Reputational damage for not reporting (0%)

**Theme 2: The Role of the Mandated Reporter**
- To protect children (61.4%)
- Prevent damage to children (4.5%)
- Promote well-being of children (6.8%)
- Change the family (0%)

**Theme 3: Reasons to Report**
- Child maltreatment is a form of trauma (20.5%)
- Child maltreatment is an ACE (20.5%)
- Child maltreatment affects brain development (25%)
- Mentioned all three (9.1%)

**Theme 4A: Child Maltreatment: Physical Abuse**
- Definition (88.6%)
- Examples (47.7%)
- Child indicators (90.0%)
- Parent indicators (22.7%)
- Included all four (20.5%)
- Corporal punishment versus abuse (54.5%)
- Accidental versus non-accidental injuries (56.8%)
- Photographs of injuries (22.7%)

**Theme 4B: Child Maltreatment: Sexual Abuse**
- Definition (84.1%)
- Examples (79.5%)
- Child indicators (79.5%)
- Parent indicators (36.3%)
- Included all four (definition, examples, child indicators, and parent indicators) (25%)
- Sex trafficking (70.5%)
- Grooming (11.4%)

**Theme 4C: Child Maltreatment: Psychological Maltreatment**
- Definition (72.7%)
- Examples (52.3%)
- Child indicators (70.5%)
- Parent indicators (27.3%)
- Included all four (definition, examples, child indicators, and parent indicators)(11.4%)
As these data clearly illustrate, there are many notable gaps in state-sponsored mandated reporter curricula. Specifically, only a few trainings identified motivating reasons why reports should be made; only about one fourth included a definition, indicators, and examples of each type of maltreatment; the average number of suggestions for responding to a disclosure made by a child was three; and few curricula addressed barriers to reporting or the impact of reporting on the reporter. It can be concluded that the trainings as a whole are not providing mandated reporters with the types of information and skills they need to adequately discharge their duty. Comprehensive information about definitions, examples, and indicators of the major types of childhood maltreatment was missing. In addition, the trainings lack the kinds of information that would motivate reporters to see their role as part of society’s effort to protect children, and they are failing to adequately address reluctance about reporting. Additionally, mandated reporters are rarely provided training on the dos and don’ts to provide a trauma-informed response to a child’s disclosure. Fortunately, improvements are possible.

**Recommendations**

We recommend an immediate and concerted effort to upgrade the content of curricula so that
mandated reporters will be well-informed, motivated, and able to optimally participate in the protection of children from all forms of child maltreatment as part of a broader child protection system. APSAC members can take a leadership role in reviewing their state’s curriculum and suggesting ways to upgrade and enhance it through the proper state-level child advocacy channels. In addition, until current trainings are upgraded, all child maltreatment professionals can supplement their own training using the rubric provided here to ensure that they are familiar with all forms of maltreatment definitions, examples, child indicators, and parent indicators. They should ensure that they are informed regarding the multiple ways that maltreatment negatively impacts children, families, and society and be aware of their duty and to report suspected cases and the mechanisms for doing so.

References


*Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 36* (11), 13–32. https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2011v36n11.4


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