

RAP Sheet

RESEARCH ADVANCING PRACTICE

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EXPERTS USE CONCRETE RATHER THAN INFERENTIAL INFORMATION IN MAKING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE DECISIONS

A group of 58 child sexual abuse experts were asked to make judgments about vignettes describing possible abuse. The experts were mental health professionals with a Master's degree or higher who had experience conducting child sexual abuse evaluations. The researcher investigated how much experts' decision-making was affected by disclosure, collateral information (recent behaviors and symptoms reported by someone who knows the child well), child's affect, and anatomical doll play. Disclosure had the largest effect on decision-making, followed by collateral information, doll play and child's affect (which had little effect on their decisions). This result suggests that experts rely more on concrete evidence (disclosure and collateral information) than on inferential information (child's affect and doll play) when making judgments. Analyses also compared experts' judgments to the opinions of a sample of 64 college students. Experts were slightly more conservative than the students in their decisions (students were more likely to conclude that abuse had occurred, and had higher confidence ratings of their decisions than experts), and experts displayed more child-believing attitudes. Experts also demonstrated more agreement among themselves than the students. The author explained that experts in the field might be using concrete information to reach abuse decisions, and then use inferential information to guide the line of questioning, the type of play used, the types of statements made by the expert, and decisions regarding when to conclude an evaluation or have the child return for another visit. Lastly, the author stated that these findings go against the concern that experts jump to conclusions of abuse merely based upon suggestive, symbolic material.

Peters, D. F. (2001). Examining child sexual abuse evaluations: The types of information affecting expert judgment. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 25, 149-178.

TEACHERS MAY NEED MORE EDUCATION ABOUT CHILD ABUSE REPORTING

Teachers and administrators are mandated reporters of child abuse in all 50 states. Unfortunately, although schools make the greatest number of reports of suspected child abuse, school personnel are also the most likely group *not* to report if they suspect abuse. A survey of 197 Miami teachers was conducted to investigate their history of reporting suspected abuse, and to analyze their responses to two case vignettes in which a fictional child discloses abuse. More (vs. fewer) years in teaching, being female (vs. male), and being a special education (vs. regular classroom) teacher were associated with an increased likelihood of reporting abuse. Eleven percent of the teachers responded that there had been at least one time when they had suspected abuse, but did not report to school administrators or to CPS. The most common reasons given for failure to report included: fear of

making an inaccurate report, feeling that CPS would not help the child, and having only the child's report (without physical evidence). These teachers generally did not feel that their training prepared them to be reporters, with less than half rating either their pre-service or in-service training as "adequate." For the two fictional vignettes (both of which were independently judged to be legally reportable), only 26% of the teachers indicated they would make an official CPS report in the scenario describing abuse by a parent, and only 11% indicated they would make an official CPS report in the scenario describing abuse by another teacher. Greater percentages (49% for the first scenario and 64% for the second) would make a report to the school administration in these cases. However, since 40% did not feel that their administration would support them in making a report, simply alerting administrators may not be sufficient. The author concluded that giving teachers greater knowledge regarding legal standards and CPS procedures and services for reported cases may enhance their likelihood of reporting suspected abuse.

Kenny, M. C. (2001). Child abuse reporting: Teachers' perceived deterrents. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 25, 81-92.

USE OF SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION IN NEBRASKA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Exclusionary discipline practices (suspension and expulsion) have long been the staple for the most severe types of disruptive and/or dangerous behavior by students. However, some research has suggested that one factor associated with the most violent behavior by students is a lack of connection with the teachers and other students, a feeling that can be aggravated by exclusionary discipline. Researchers surveyed 265 Nebraska elementary- and secondary-school administrators about their schools' discipline practices. The overall rate of misbehavior (the number of office referrals, in-school and out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions) was related to several characteristics of schools. Secondary schools reported higher rates of misbehavior than elementary schools; schools with more students reported higher rates of misbehavior; and schools with a higher percentage of students receiving free lunch reported higher rates of misbehavior. Especially for serious offenses (for example, fighting, vandalism, and theft), secondary schools were more likely to use suspension and expulsion than elementary schools. Schools also differed in the availability of school-, community-, and district-based support services available to deal with student misbehavior. Elementary school administrators were more likely to have access to student support services such as social skills instruction, conflict resolution, peer mediation, community centers and clubs, and a district-based behavior management team. For only one support service (alternative class/school) did secondary administrators feel they had more access than

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MISSION STATEMENT: The *RAP Sheet* is intended to inform professionals across the state of Nebraska of current findings from social science research that could impact the delivery of services to children and families. Summaries of recent articles from academic journals (and occasionally book chapters) on the areas of child protection and juvenile justice are the focus, with smaller sections reserved for announcements and websites of interest. Other topics will be included in special issues as needed. Citations are provided in the format used by the American Psychological Association (APA), and are available through many university libraries. The *RAP Sheet* is funded in part by the State of Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services System. Comments and suggestions are always welcome and can be sent to the editors or faculty advisor.

elementary administrators. Interestingly, administrators of elementary schools were more likely than secondary administrators to agree that school suspension contributes to the dropout rate, and less likely to agree that suspension is beneficial to the school. The authors concluded that while administrators of secondary schools see suspensions and expulsions as removing the problem students (and therefore decreasing overall misbehavior in the school), administrators of elementary schools view such exclusionary discipline as likely to lead to greater problems with the student later. Further, the lack of support services available to secondary school administrators may be responsible in part for the higher rates of misbehavior and need for exclusionary discipline.

Winbinger, B., Katsiyannis, A., & Archwamety, T. (2000). Disciplinary practices in Nebraska's public schools. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 9*, 389-399.

EMPLOYMENT MAY NOT DECREASE JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

About half of youths aged 16 to 19 in the U.S. are employed. During the school year, high school juniors work on average 18.9 hours a week, and seniors work about 23.5 hours a week. It has largely been assumed that employment is good for youth, and that the absence of employment fosters delinquency. However, this might not be the case. In this study, 326 high school seniors who had worked within the last year were surveyed about their job delinquency. Occupational delinquency included a variety of acts, such as purposely short-changing a customer, putting more hours on a time-card than actually worked, and helping a coworker steal the employer's property. Two-thirds of respondents reported that they had committed at least one of those acts in the past year. Also, the authors found that youths with delinquent propensities appear to be selected (by themselves or by others) into jobs marked by negative work environments. Once in this workplace, youth are likely to encounter others similarly disposed to delinquency. In other words, requiring a delinquent youth to find employment may not necessarily decrease his/her delinquency. If a youth is placed in a negative work environment, the youth is likely to come into contact with other delinquent youth, and then be more likely to engage in delinquency on the job that can spill over into other areas of the youth's life. Thus, if a decrease in delinquency is the desired end, caution should be taken to select a positive work environment so that the youth is less likely to come into contact with delinquent peers.

Wright, J. P. & Cullen, F. T. (2000). Juvenile involvement in occupational delinquency. *Criminology, 38*, 863-896.

VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DIFFER WITH RESPECT TO THE LABELS THEY USE

Whether or not a woman considers herself to be abused, battered, or a victim of violence may impact her receptivity to intervention programs. A recent study of 78 women who had suffered at least one physical assault in their current or most recent relationship measured two main topics: how they labeled themselves and how they labeled others.

Thirty-eight percent of the women would not apply any of the three labels ("abuse," "victim of violence," or "battered woman") to their own situation. Of those who reported two or more instances of physical force in a current or most recent relationship, 26% did not apply any of the labels to themselves. Women who had experienced more frequent or more severe physical force were more likely to endorse labels. White women were less likely than Black women to use labels for themselves; and women reporting higher incomes were less likely to self-label. If a woman had terminated the relationship, she was more likely to use one or more of the three labels. In labeling others, 82% of the women labeled a "grab" as abuse, 99% labeled a "slap" as abuse, and 100% labeled a "punch" as abuse. However, whether or not a woman used self-labeling was not related to her labeling of others. The authors concluded that these women were more likely to label any level of physical force as abuse when it concerned others, but were not as quick to put a label on their own situation. Possibly, when thinking about their own experiences these women are taking into consideration situational factors or mitigating circumstances, which makes them less likely to label their experience as abusive. The results suggest that when communicating (either in person, or through print and televised public service messages) with women who experience physical force in relationships it is important to realize that not all of these women would label themselves "abused," "battered" or as "victims." Furthermore, intervention strategies could incorporate situational factors and different labels to more effectively reach these women.

Hamby, S. L., & Gray-Little, B. (2000). Labeling partner violence: When do victims differentiate among acts? *Violence and Victims, 15*, 173-186.

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