

FEATURE

No, researchers should not be mandated reporters of child abuse

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Let me begin by agreeing with Dr. Urquiza's central point: It is critically important to protect children from abuse. As individuals, we do have an obligation to report abuse. But this does not mean that research psychologists should be mandated reporters of abuse. In fact, I think that treating scientists as mandated reporters could do more harm than good. Because researchers typically do not have access to information that is relevant to the detection of abuse, we cannot serve effectively as mandated reporters. Moreover, mandated reporting could have some serious negative consequences.

The purpose of mandated reporting is to ensure those professionals who have specific training or experiences in detecting child abuse are able to report it, without fear of the liability associated with false reports. The notion of specific, relevant data is critical to the definition of a mandated reporter. For example, I think that pediatricians are legitimate mandated reporters of abuse. Pediatricians have access to information that ordinary people do not have, such as radiographs that reveal specific fractures associated with abuse.

In contrast, research psychologists usually do not have access to information that is reliably related to child abuse. For example, studies of cognitive development rarely provide information that has anything to do with child abuse. There is nothing about a test of spatial reasoning or early literacy, for example that specifically and reliably reveals information about child abuse. Because our tasks and training do not allow us to detect child abuse more accurately or more frequently than the average person could, we should not act as mandated reporters. Of course, as individuals, we should report child abuse if we detect or suspect it. But we should not claim knowledge that we do not have, and that our data could not provide.

One might argue that mandated reporting does no harm, or that the need to protect children outweighs all other concerns. This perspective ignores the very real risks of false allegations of child abuse. Mandated reporters would be criminally responsible for failure to report a suspicion of child abuse. But, given that they will lack valid and reliable means for detecting that abuse, many of the reports will almost certainly be false alarms. Although the legal system may eventually exonerate the falsely accused parent, the allegation of child abuse is obviously traumatic and disruptive to parents and children alike. This risk would be worth taking if our research could reliably indicate child abuse, but given that it rarely can, we would be putting many children and parents at risk of false alarm while not increasing our ability to detect abuse when it does occur.

Moreover, requiring researchers to act as mandated reporters could have a chilling effect on research that is beneficial to children. Every consent form will now have to inform parents that the researcher is legally required to report suspicions of child abuse. Given that our research usually has nothing to do with abuse, parents may (legitimately) wonder what we might be looking for that requires us to put such an alarming warning in our consent forms. Parents therefore may elect not to participate in the research, and that is a real risk to children.

This does not mean that research psychologists should never be mandated reporters. There may be specific situations in which an individual institutional review board (IRB) might legitimately decide that a researcher is mandated to report abuse. For example, if a researcher is using specific measures that are relevant to the detection of abuse, then the IRB might require that the researcher act as a mandated reporter. Defining researchers a priori as mandated reporters specifically removes this discretion and makes us all perform a task that we are rarely qualified to perform.

In summary, mandated reporting of child abuse makes sense for those who have specific information that is likely to reveal abuse. Research psychologists typically do not meet this criterion. All of us want to help and to protect children. Research psychologists can contribute to this goal by doing what we do best—studying children's development. We will do no good if we are forced to make judgments without reliable and valid data, and we could end up doing a great deal of harm.

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