

# Factors influencing school counsellors' decision not to report child sexual abuse

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*Using a state-wide sample of 122 school counsellors (52 males and 70 females) in Queensland, Australia, factors which influenced their decision not to report child sexual abuse were examined. These factors were a lack of evidence; lack of confidence in the authorities to accurately evaluate or protect sexually abused children; adverse effects on the family's social standing in the community; potential to break up the family; and the fear of breaking counsellor-client confidentiality. Further, school counsellors were not likely to report all cases of child sexual abuse when they suspected it, thus confirming the popular belief that child sexual abuse is under-reported by them.*

The role of the school counsellor in detecting, invigilating and reporting cases of child sexual abuse is an important one. The school counsellor is frequently the first or second professional person to come in contact with sexually abused children, and therefore they play a crucial role in the detection and revelation of such abuse (Abrahams, Casey & Daro, 1992; Goldman & Padayachi, 2000a, 2000b; Hazzard, 1984; Vevier & Tharinger, 1986). However, whether a school counsellor decides to report child sexual abuse or not depends on a number of factors. Previous research has assessed the factors that influence a counsellor's decision to report (eg, Crenshaw, Crenshaw & Lichtenberg, 1995; Goldman & Padayachi, 2001; Zellman, 1990). However, just as important are the factors that affect a counsellor's decision *not* to report. Since data suggests that child sexual abuse is under-reported, even by mandated reporters (eg, James, Womack & Stauss, 1978; Muehleman & Kimmons, 1991), if the reasons for *not* reporting are understood, these can be targeted in an attempt to improve reporting rates. Therefore, this paper addresses some of the factors associated with not reporting child sexual abuse.

## LITERATURE

### CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND SCHOOL COUNSELLORS

Social workers, medical personnel and teachers have traditionally been concerned with cases of child sexual abuse. However, many researchers believe that the school counsellor now plays a crucial role in its identification and investigation (Herman, 1985; Miller & Miller, 1979; Olson, 1985; Westcott, 1980). The most important concern of the school counsellor is the

psychological well-being of the victim, and research has documented serious psychological consequences of child sexual abuse (Briere & Runtz, 1988; Finkelhor & Browne, 1986; Tong & Oates, 1990). The counsellor must then deal with the resultant behavioural and adjustment problems in school.

### Counsellor involvement and role

The involvement of school counsellors in addressing child sexual abuse has been discussed extensively (Brassard, Tyler & Kehle, 1983; Vevier & Tharinger, 1986; Westcott, 1980). As most of the victims of child sexual abuse are primary school age (Finkelhor, 1979; 1984; Giarretto, 1976; Goldman & Goldman, 1988a; 1988b; Goldman & Padayachi, 1997, 2000a; Goldman & Ronkin 2000), school is the best place, and the school counsellor in a key position to help in the discovery, intervention, treatment and prevention of abuse (Abrahams, Casey & Daro, 1992; Brassard, et al., 1983; Hazzard, 1984; McFadden, 1989; O'Hagan, 1989; Vevier & Tharinger, 1986; Westcott, 1980).

Since the welfare of children is the bailiwick of school personnel most of the time, school counsellors and other school personnel have moral, professional and, in some states, legal responsibilities to detect and report cases of child sexual abuse (see Goldman & Padayachi, 2000c; Padayachi, 1994; Westcott, 1980). School counsellors have special training in interviewing, assessment and counselling skills, which are essential skills in working with the abused (Vevier & Tharinger, 1986). School counsellors have on-going contact with other children, teachers and the community at large who may have knowledge or suspicions that child sexual abuse is occurring (see

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Finkelhor, 1982; 1994). Thus, school counsellors are seen by many researchers to be in a strategic position to detect, intervene and ultimately deter or prevent child sexual abuse (see Abrahams et al., 1992).

Many researchers have discussed the role of the school counsellor in response to child sexual abuse (Griggs & Gale, 1977; Minard, 1993; Remley & Fry, 1993; Vevier & Tharinger, 1986; Westcott, 1980). Westcott (1980) mentions three specific roles, namely listener, child advocate and public educator. Vevier and Tharinger (1986, p. 303) present a two-level framework which delineates seven role functions of a school psychologist. These are:

1. be knowledgeable about child sexual abuse in order to act as a resource person;
2. provide crisis intervention after disclosure;
3. evaluate behavioural and physical indicators of suspected cases;
4. report cases of child sexual abuse;
5. provide on-going indirect intervention;
6. provide direct intervention;
7. implement prevention activities.

The first five functions are proposed as a first level of involvement which Vevier and Tharinger (1986) believe all school counsellors should carry out. The last two functions are for those school counsellors who are motivated and have the training to provide counselling services to the child victim, and actively participate in the development and implementation of prevention activities.

Some proponents of counsellor involvement in child sexual abuse believe that the counsellor must also educate children and teachers about the issue (Minard, 1993; Westcott, 1980). Others believe that the counsellor should provide counselling services to the child and the family after the case has been reported (Riggs, 1982). Some researchers advocate a wider role for the school counsellor, extending beyond the school. Parent education programs to enhance public awareness of the problem are seen as essential by Riggs (1982) and Vevier and Tharinger (1986), while a liaison role between the

abused child, family and the protective agencies is advocated by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Governing Board (1981).

Although many researchers agree that school counsellors should intervene in child sexual abuse cases (Riggs, 1982; Vevier & Tharinger, 1986), there is little agreement on when the counsellor must delineate his or her responsibilities. There appears to be a general consensus among researchers that school counsellors should be cognisant of indicators of sexual abuse, be aware of the reporting laws of the state, and report to the appropriate authorities any suspected cases of child sexual abuse (Miller & Miller, 1979; Riggs, 1982; Vevier & Tharinger, 1986). Clearly, those researchers who have specifically addressed the school counsellors' involvement in the problem of child sexual abuse have delegated several responsibilities to counsellors, but little is known about whether counsellors can actually carry out these roles effectively.

#### INDICATORS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

If school counsellors and other school personnel are to be effective in their efforts to prevent child sexual abuse, they need to be familiar with the physical signs and behavioural changes that may be indicative of such abuse. The greatest barrier to teachers and counsellors reporting cases of child sexual abuse to the appropriate authorities is their inability to identify cases (Abrahams et al., 1992; Levin, 1983; Wilson, Thomas & Schuette, 1983). To assist mandated reporters of sexual abuse, some researchers have compiled comprehensive lists of indicators (Broadhurst, 1979; Herman, 1985; James & Burch, 1999; McFadden, 1989; Petrie, 1986; Whetsell-Mitchell, 1995). Physical indicators include vaginal discharge; venereal disease; genitals chafed, bruised, itching; pregnancy in a child under the age of 13; torn, stained or bloody underwear; and difficulty in sitting or walking. Behavioural indicators include sophisticated sexual knowledge; low self-esteem; fears of separation and loss; inappropriate sexual behaviours (eg, clinging, fondling, flirting, masturbating in public); self-mutilation; age regression

in toilet training; gender role confusion; consistently arriving early for school or reluctant to go home after school; unwillingness to undress or take part in physical education; frequent absences from school justified by male parent or guardian; disclosure by the child that he or she has been molested; frequently running away from home; and manifestation through child's drawing, stories or play.

These indicators do not exist in isolation, but often cluster together (Herman, 1985; McFadden, 1989; Miller & Miller, 1979; Petrie, 1986). The presence of one indicator does not necessarily mean that sexual abuse has taken place, but two or more of these indicators increase the possibility of the child having been sexually abused.

Further, the most important indicator of sexual abuse appears to be the child's verbal disclosure of the incidents (Vevier & Tharinger, 1986). Researchers believe that children seldom fabricate accounts of sexual abuse, unless coerced into lying (De Young, 1986; Herman, 1985). However, the task of verifying suspicion of abuse has also been made easier by the development of conceptual models. For example, De Young (1986) emphasises the four Cs in her conceptual model; that is, she postulates that 'if accusations were always made with clarity, celerity, certainty, and consistency, few doubts as to their truth would ever arise' (p. 551). Finkelhor and Browne (1985) also offer a step-by-step process for determining the truthfulness of a child's allegation. The first step provides a list of symptoms that can be used as indicators of sexual abuse. The second step is to assess the child's vulnerability to sexual abuse. In the final step, the reasons for false allegations of sexual abuse are explored.

#### INTERVIEWING

When a school counsellor suspects sexual abuse has occurred, the counsellor may talk to the child in order to verify suspicions. Interviewing the suspected victim must take place in an environment where the child feels safe, and at a time when the child can demonstrate to the interviewer that he or she is without fear, tension or confusion (Furniss, 1991; McFadden, 1989; O'Hagan, 1989; Wilder, 1991).

Clinical and research evidence shows that an interviewer's approach and style of questioning is crucial when considering the child's accuracy of recall (Jones & McQuiston, 1988; King & Yuille, 1987). The child should be allowed to tell his or her own story about what happened (Brassard, et. al. 1983; James & Burch, 1999; McFadden, 1989; Vevier & Tharinger, 1986; Wilder, 1991). Thus, the counsellor must avoid asking leading questions, feeding information, helping with details, or pressuring the child (James & Burch, 1999).

The counsellor should also be clear about the children's vocabulary (Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 1998; McFadden, 1989; Westcott, 1980) as research has shown that children have a wide range of vocabulary for body parts, sexual organs and sexual acts (Goldman & Goldman, 1982; Goldman, 1995). Other critical tasks for the counsellor are to: (a) establish a rapport, (b) gain trust, (c) diffuse anxiety, and (d) communicate at an age-appropriate level (Sgroi, Porter & Blick, 1982; Jones, 1990).

In addition, before interviewing a child, it is important that the counsellor is aware of the child protection requirements in their state. In many states in Australia, it is required that counsellors and teachers do not interview children regarding the abuse they may have experienced. For example, in Queensland, the Child Protection Procedures state that:

the role of employees in the detection of harm of a student is not an investigative one. State educational institution based employees must not undertake investigations beyond satisfying themselves that they have reasonable grounds to suspect that a student has been, or is at risk of harm (Queensland Department of Education, 1998).

Similarly, in Western Australia, school personnel do not have an investigative role in determining whether abuse or neglect has occurred (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994).

In other states, school counsellors are also restricted in the interviewing that they can conduct. In South Australia, interviewing a suspected victim of abuse is not expressly ruled out. However, the guidelines for mandated

notifiers state that school employees will not be helping the child if they conduct an investigation which may prejudice any subsequent investigation by Family and Youth Services or the police (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2000). In the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), guidelines also suggest that staff members should not quiz the student or investigate the matter beyond asking the student in broad terms to tell what happened (ACT Department of Education and Community Services, 2000). Thus, school counsellors must be guided by the requirements of their state education department.

### REPORTING AND REFERRAL

The importance of reporting suspected cases of sexual abuse is highlighted by the high frequency of occurrence and recurrence. Elliot (1985) reports that child sexual offenders average 75 assaults before they are eventually discovered which supports the contention that most of the cases go unreported. To prevent recurrence of sexual abuse, every state in America has enacted into law a mandatory child abuse reporting statute (Walker, Bonner & Kaufman, 1988).

### Non-reporting in the USA

In the United States, it is a crime for child care workers, school personnel, medical professionals, social workers, psychologists, and members of the clergy *not* to report cases of child maltreatment (Herzberger, 1985). The obligation to report arises when the adult has reasonable cause to suspect or believe that the child has been abused. However, a large majority of mandated reporters do not report cases of child abuse to child protective services (Muehleman & Kimmons, 1981; Swoboda, Elwork, Sales & Levine, 1978; Zellman, 1990). In an effort to encourage reporting, every state in the United States included an immunity provision in the reporting statute (Riggs, 1982), providing immunity from civil and criminal actions if the original report was made in good faith. A majority of the states also provide a specific penalty for wilful failure to make a required report (Besharov, 1983; Walker, et al., 1988).

Studies in the United States indicate that teachers and counsellors receive very little training about child abuse, and as a result, lack knowledge about its important aspects (Abrahams et al., 1992; Batchelor, Dean, Gridley & Batchelor, 1990; Hazzard, 1984; Hazzard & Rupp, 1986; McCafferey & Tewey, 1978; Riggs & Evans, 1978). Due to this lack of knowledge, only a few cases of child abuse are reported by school personnel. For example, a report by the American Humane Association (1981) revealed that only 13% of child abuse reports were referred by school personnel, although 42 states specifically mandated reporting at that time (Clearinghouse on Child Abuse Information, 1982). This figure is consistent with other research findings (eg. Broadhurst, 1978; Camblin, Jr. & Prout, 1983).

### Non-reporting in Australia

The laws relating to the reporting of suspected cases of child sexual abuse vary from state to state. For example, in New South Wales, mandatory reporting of suspected cases of child sexual abuse has been extended from physicians to school personnel (NSW Child Protection Council, 1987). In order to prepare school personnel for the introduction of this new law, NSW Department of Education conducted in-service courses for school counsellors, principals and a teacher from each school. After the introduction of the law, the number of cases of child sexual abuse reported by school personnel increased dramatically from 11.4% to 24% (Lamond, 1989). Thus, the new mandatory reporting requirement for school personnel achieved its main objective of an increase in the likelihood of victims of child abuse being identified.

In Queensland, until 1998, there was no legal mandate that required teachers and school counsellors to report suspected cases of child sexual abuse. The Queensland Department of Education (1989) policy stated only that 'teachers are encouraged to make voluntary notification of the suspected child sexual abuse, even though such action is not mandatory'. However, since April 1998,

If an employee receives information that provides reasonable grounds for

suspecting that a student is in need of protection from harm from internal or external sources, the allegation or information must be reported to the school principal... (If the allegation is against the Principal the matter must be reported to the Manager, Education Services, District Office.) If allegations may constitute child abuse by a person external to the state educational institution, the Principal must report the matter to the Police or the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care (Queensland Department of Education, 1998, p13).

This policy applies to all employees of the Department of Education. Consequently, school counsellors, by reporting suspected cases of child sexual abuse, may, in future, make a major contribution towards addressing child sexual abuse and help prevent its occurrence (Goldman & Padayachi, 2000b).

### SCHOOL COUNSELLORS' SKILLS

Reporting suspected cases of child sexual abuse is not an easy task for the school counsellor, or for any other person in the helping professions, as they are bound by requirements of confidentiality (ie, information about the client will not be disclosed). However, the school counsellor need not make false promises of total secrecy since legal requirements and the moral responsibility of protecting children in all cases supersede the ideal of confidentiality. In determining the necessity for making a report, school counsellors need to remember that their role is to protect children and not to apprehend or interrogate the perpetrators (Rencken, 1989).

Little is known, however, about whether or not school counsellors have the knowledge and skills to fulfil these roles. Only a few studies have been conducted to assess whether school counsellors are aware of their states' laws, and if they have the working knowledge to intervene effectively. Wilson and associates (1983) in Kentucky, USA, found that even though counsellors reported they could identify the symptoms, knew how to report cases, and had counselling procedures to work with sexually abused children, they encountered a limited number of cases. However, this

study did not assess the level of counselling procedures that the respondents had, nor the degree of competence in recognising the symptoms of child abuse.

Krupnick (1981), in New Jersey, assessed school counsellors' knowledge and attitudes towards incest, incest taboo, detection, assessment and treatment. The results showed that a majority of school counsellors were not aware of the procedures for reporting suspected cases of incest, did not have any training in understanding incest and how to treat it, and needed additional knowledge and training. This study specifically explored only one type of sexual abuse (ie, incest), so the results may not be generalisable to other types of sexual abuse. Thus, further research is needed to ascertain counsellors' attitudes, knowledge and needs.

### Queensland school counsellors

To date, almost all the studies of school counsellors' responses to child sexual abuse have been conducted in the United States. Although school counsellors in Queensland have been delegated responsibilities regarding child sexual abuse, as far as is known, there is currently no Australian or Queensland data regarding the factors that influence the decision not to report it.

## THE STUDY METHOD

This study aims to explore factors which influence school counsellors' decision not to report child sexual abuse using a questionnaire sent to all school counsellors employed by the Queensland Department of Education. Four hypothetical vignettes explored school counsellors' professional decision-making behaviour regarding detection and non-reporting of cases of child sexual abuse.

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire sought demographic data of counsellors, including gender, age, ethnic background, marital status, parental status, work setting, number of years in the profession and the level of tertiary qualification. It also requested information on the factors that influenced them not to report child

sexual abuse. Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS-PC Version 4). The results were indicated by raw numbers and percentages. When comparisons were made, chi-square analysis, t-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used as tests of significance. Statistical significant difference was set at the .05 level

### Sample

Questionnaires were sent to all 283 school counsellors working in state high, primary and pre-schools and school support centres. Of these, 122 (44%) completed and returned the questionnaire. Considering the sensitive nature of the topic, such a response rate seems reasonable and also compares favourably with similar surveys. For instance, Krupnick (1981) reported a response rate of 48% in his survey of school psychologists' awareness of, and attitudes towards, incest. Similarly, Finlayson (1990) reported a response rate of 43% in her survey of psychologists' professional judgements related to child abuse reporting laws in child sexual abuse cases in the United States.

### Demographic characteristics of sample

The final sample of 122 school counsellors consisted of 52 males (43%), and 70 females (57%). This compares favourably with the gender balance of membership of the Queensland Guidance Counselling Association. Almost half of the counsellors, or 46% of both males (n=24) and females (n=32), were between 40 and 49 years of age. The results of a two-tailed probability t-test showed that males were significantly older than females ( $p < 0.05$ ).

The majority of males (77%, n=40) and females (57%, n=39) were married. Some 15% of males and 16% of females were single and the remaining were either separated, divorced, widowed or living with a domestic partner (a de facto relationship). Similarly, 69% (n=36) of males and 57% (n=39) of females were biological parents. More females (47%, n=33) than males (39%, n=20) were High School counsellors, while 30% (n=21) of females and 31% (n=16) of males were Primary School counsellors.

Male counsellors had more years of school counselling experience than female counsellors, with 46% (n=24) of males having ten or more years of experience compared to only 13% (n=9) of females. A two-tailed probability t-test revealed that male counsellors were significantly more experienced in school counselling than females (p<0.05)

There was no significant difference between the female and male counsellors' tertiary qualifications. A large majority of both female and male counsellors had either Postgraduate Diploma or Masters qualifications. None had doctorates.

**Questionnaire Vignettes**

Four hypothetical vignettes containing information about a child and symptoms of sexual abuse were presented. The type of sexual experience in each vignette varied from non-contact sexual act (Vignette D) to fondling (Vignettes A and C) to sexual intercourse (Vignette B). Background information was provided, including family background, the age of the child, and the type of symptoms. In each vignette, symptom presentation was further elucidated during a hypothetical interview with the school counsellor. For each case presented, the school counsellor was not able to elicit any further information from the child at the end of the interview.

Following each vignette, a set of five questions was presented, with responses made on a four-point scale. In the first question, counsellors were asked to indicate their level of suspicion that child sexual abuse was occurring. In the second question, counsellors were asked to indicate the likelihood of reporting the case to the appropriate authorities and subsequently in the third question, counsellors were asked to indicate whether they would still report the case if the child denied being sexually abused. In the final two questions, counsellors were presented with a list of factors and asked to select and rate the degree to which each factor influenced their decision to report or not to report the case to the appropriate authorities.

**RESULTS**

**Factors that influence school counsellors' decision not to report cases of child sexual abuse**

Table 1 presents the number and percentage of male and female counsellors who answered Questions four or five following each vignette. Question 4 asked the counsellor to rate the influence that several factors had on their decision not to report the case to the appropriate authorities, while Question 5 asked them to rate the influence factors had on the decision to report.

Most counsellors would likely or definitely report child sexual abuse to the appropriate authorities, therefore fewer counsellors rated the factors influencing their decision not to report (Question 4), than rated factors influencing their decision to report (Question 5).

**Reasons why counsellors decided not to report**

A list of factors was provided to explore the reasons why a school counsellor would not report a case to the appropriate authorities. The school counsellors were asked to rate on a four-point scale the impact that each of

the following factors had:

- 1) little or no evidence/suspicion of sexual abuse in the case to report;
- 2) evidence does not warrant breaking of counsellor-client confidentiality;
- 3) concern that reporting may break up the family;
- 4) premature reporting may have adverse effects on the family's social standing in the community;
- 5) lack of faith in the appropriate authorities to accurately evaluate or protect cases of child sexual abuse;
- 6) fear of possible legal ramification from making false allegation;
- 7) fear of school board/principal/head teacher's disapproval.

**VIGNETTE A**

In Vignette A, a boy, aged eight, exhibits a sudden change in behaviour and an unexpected deterioration in academic performance. The school counsellor finds the boy sad and withdrawn. During the interview the boy draws a picture of a man and makes vague statements about a bad man, but does not make any specific statement about being sexually abused.

**Table 1**  
**Number and percentage of counsellors who answered questions 4 or 5**

	Vignette A		Vignette B		Vignette C		Vignette D	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Answered Question 4</b>								
Female (F)	9	13	12	18	7	10	13	19
Male (M)	0	0	9	17	4	8	3	6
<b>Answered Question 5</b>								
Female (F)	59	87	55	82	61	90	54	81
Male (M)	52	100	43	83	48	92	49	94
TOTAL* F	68	100	67	100	68	100	67	100
M	52	100	52	100	52	100	52	100
* Two counsellors in Vignettes A and C, three in Vignettes B and D, did not answer either Question 4 or 5.								
NOTE: Question 4: Rate the influence that each of the following factors had on your decision not to report this case to the appropriate authorities. Question 5: Rate the influence that each of the following factors had on your decision to report this case to the appropriate authorities.								

**Table 2**

**Factors influencing school counsellors not to report the case in Vignette A to the appropriate authorities (%)**

FACTORS	No influence		Little influence		Moderate influence		Strong influence	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Little or no evidence	0	67	0	11	0	0	0	22
Evidence does not want breaking of counsellor-client confidentiality	0	22	0	56	0	0	0	22
Reporting may break up the family	0	22	0	22	0	22	0	34
Reporting may have adverse effects on the family's social standing	0	33	0	33	0	22	0	11
Lack of faith in the appropriate authorities	0	22	0	0	0	56	0	22
Fear of legal ramifications	0	67	0	11	0	11	0	11
Fear of school board, principal, head teacher's disapproval	0	63	0	37	0	0	0	0
The percentage in the columns do not sum as some respondents indicated more than one factor influencing their decision NOT to report the case presented in Vignette A.								

Table 2 shows that all male counsellors would report this case to the appropriate authorities. However, for non-reporting female counsellors, the greatest concern was a lack of faith in the appropriate authorities, with 78% indicating this factor had a moderate to strong influence on their decision not to report

the case. Another area of concern for 56% was that reporting might break up the family. Female non-reporting counsellors also indicated that fear of school board/ principal/head teacher's disapproval was the least influential factor in their decision not to report the case.

**Table 3**

**Factors influencing school counsellors not to report the case in Vignette B to the appropriate authorities (%)**

FACTORS	No influence		Little influence		Moderate influence		Strong influence	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Little or no evidence	11	18	0	9	56	46	33	27
Evidence does not want breaking of counsellor-client confidentiality	45	18	33	46	22	36	0	0
Reporting may break up the family	44	20	33	60	22	10	0	10
Reporting may have adverse effects on the family's social standing	44	30	22	20	11	30	22	20
Lack of faith in the appropriate authorities	44	0	44	30	0	50	11	20
Fear of legal ramifications	67	40	33	40	0	10	0	10
Fear of school board, principal, head teacher's disapproval	77	56	11	44	0	0	11	0
The percentage in the columns do not sum as some respondents indicated more than one factor influencing their decision NOT to report the case presented in Vignette B.								

**VIGNETTE B**

In Vignette B, a girl, aged nine, is withdrawn, clingy and fearful. The child arrives at school very early and leaves for home very late. During the interview with the school counsellor, the girl makes a passing remark about the doll being very lucky by not having a 'pee-wee' as Tom would not be able to 'poke' her. However, she does not make any specific statement about being sexually abused.

Table 3 reveals that 89% of male and 73% of female non-reporting counsellors indicated that they believed there was little or no evidence of child sexual abuse in this case. Hence they felt the case did not warrant reporting. A lack of faith in the authorities also appeared to be a concern for the non-reporting females, with 70% indicating that this factor had a moderate to strong influence on their decision. Premature reporting which may have adverse effects on the family's social standing in the community was another area of concern for 50% of the female and 33% of the male non-reporters. Fear of legal ramification from making false allegations and fear of the school board/principal/headteacher's disapproval were the least influential factors for both male and female non-reporters.

**VIGNETTE C**

In Vignette C, a teenage girl, aged 14, verbally discloses about being sexually abused to her grandmother and to the school counsellor. The symptoms presented in this case are social withdrawal and sadness. A direct disclosure about being sexually abused was made.

Table 4 shows that for 67% of the male non-reporting counsellors', their decision not to report the case was influenced by a lack of evidence provided. However, the biggest concern for most of the non-reporting female counsellors was the fear of breaking counsellor-client confidentiality, as indicated by 67% of them. Other influential factors for the female non-reporters were the lack of faith in the appropriate authorities, the lack of evidence provided and that reporting may break up the family. The least influential factors for both male and female non-reporters were the fear of possible legal ramification from making

**Table 4**  
**Factors influencing school counsellors not to report the case in Vignette C to the appropriate authorities (%)**

FACTORS	No influence		Little influence		Moderate influence		Strong influence	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Little or no evidence	0	17	33	33	67	50	0	0
Evidence does not want breaking of counsellor-client confidentiality	33	16	33	16	33	67	0	0
Reporting may break up the family	33	17	67	33	0	50	0	0
Reporting may have adverse effects on the family's social standing	33	14	67	43	0	29	0	14
Lack of faith in the appropriate authorities	33	29	33	14	33	29	0	29
Fear of legal ramifications	100	50	0	17	0	33	0	0
Fear of school board, principal, head teacher's disapproval	66	50	33	33	0	17	0	0

The percentage in the columns do not sum as some respondents indicated more than one factor influencing their decision NOT to report the case presented in Vignette C.

false allegation and the fear of school board or principal/head teacher's disapproval.

**VIGNETTE D**

In Vignette D, an eight-year-old girl shows signs of social withdrawal, nocturnal enuresis, nervousness and listlessness. Her drawings are infantile. The girl makes vague statements about a monster undressing a little girl and taking pictures of her, but she does not make any specific statement about being sexually abused. Table 5 shows

that the influential factors for male non-reporters in this vignette were the lack of evidence presented in the case and the lack of faith in the authorities to accurately evaluate or protect cases of child sexual abuse. The other factors had little or no influence on their decision-making. For the non-reporting females, 58% reported that the lack of evidence presented in the case had a moderate to strong influence on their decision. The other factors had very little or no influence in their decision not to report the case.

**Table 5**  
**Factors influencing school counsellors not to report the case in Vignette D to the appropriate authorities (%)**

FACTORS	No influence		Little influence		Moderate influence		Strong influence	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Little or no evidence	0	25	67	17	33	50	0	8
Evidence does not want breaking of counsellor-client confidentiality	33	25	67	42	0	33	0	0
Reporting may break up the family	33	27	77	46	0	27	0	0
Reporting may have adverse effects on the family's social standing	67	46	33	46	0	9	0	0
Lack of faith in the appropriate authorities	33	27	33	36	0	27	33	9
Fear of legal ramifications	67	46	33	27	0	18	0	9
Fear of school board / principal / head teacher's disapproval	33	46	67	46	0	0	0	9

The percentage in the columns do not sum as some respondents indicated more than one factor influencing their decision NOT to report the case presented in Vignette D.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal a tendency for school counsellors to under-report their suspicions of sexual abuse as the vignette analyses showed that school counsellors were more likely to suspect than to report cases of child sexual abuse. There appears to be some consensus among school counsellors about the factors that contribute to their decision not to report cases to the appropriate authorities. For both male and female school counsellors, the most influential factors for not reporting were a lack of evidence and a lack of faith in the authorities to accurately evaluate or protect cases of child sexual abuse. The other influential factors, particularly for female school counsellors, were that (a) premature reporting may have an adverse effects on the family's social standing in the community (Vignette B), (b) reporting may break up the family (Vignette A), and (c) the fear of breaking counsellor-client confidentiality (Vignette C). The least influential factors for both male and female school counsellors were the fear of possible legal ramifications for making false allegations and the fear of disapproval from the school board/principal/headteacher.

**VIGNETTE ANALYSIS**

**Counsellors' reporting behaviour**

Once the counsellor has decided that sexual abuse has occurred, he or she may face the dilemma of whether or not to report the case. In certain circumstances, it may be an automatic decision to report, depending on the nature of the abuse and the legal requirements of the state/country for notifying abuse cases.

However, findings from the vignette analysis revealed that school counsellors were not likely to report all cases of child sexual abuse when they suspected it. This result is not surprising, as in other somewhat related studies, researchers have reported similar results, even among mandated reporters (Finlayson, 1990; James, et al., 1978; Muehleman & Kimmons, 1981). Such findings confirm the popular belief that child sexual abuse is under-reported by professionals involved with child welfare, including school counsellors.

## Counsellors' non-reporting behaviour

The reasons for non-reporting were:

### a) Lack of evidence

The most salient reason given for not reporting was a lack of evidence provided in the vignettes. The school counsellor may have some element of doubt about their suspicion of abuse and may not want to report unless they have more substantial evidence.

However, in each vignette, the child was reported to display symptoms associated with child sexual abuse. Therefore, the fact that some school counsellors did not feel that there was enough evidence of abuse may partly reflect a lack of knowledge of the symptoms. Thus, training regarding the symptoms of child sexual abuse should be compulsory for all school counsellors. Further, this training should be on-going, with counsellors frequently updating their knowledge of child sexual abuse.

### b) Negative attitudes towards authorities

Negative attitudes toward appropriate authorities were also influential. The following responses from some of the school counsellors reveal their concern for the existing authorities and resources in Queensland:

'The legal system lets abused kids go back to the abused situation because the kid gets too upset in court to answer fully' (Female, 30-39 years old).

'A major concern of mine is the lack of manpower [sic] at Family Services. It has been shown as being grossly underfunded in a Government report but I haven't seen any changes recently. It seems as though they have a 'slash and burn' mentality with child-care officers. If they burn out, there are always more around the corner. What a waste of expenses and training' (Female, 40-49 years old).

'The dilemma is: How can Family Services/JAB [Juvenile Aid Bureau] protect the child from further abuse when they are stretched to the limit and have a really high turn-over of staff?' (Female, 30-39 years old).

'My confidence in the authorities to do anything to protect the children is very

low. I've seen too many bungles. Children and families left in an exposed, vulnerable state. Left raw' (Female, 30-39 years old).

'Within the school and community, procedures for notifications and immediate follow-up are not clear because there are too many.' (Male, 40-49 years old).

'Two of the least supportive characteristics of school personnel in relation to detection/reporting of child sexual abuse are (a) internal lack of communication between staff at high school level, and (b) growing distrust and disrespect between school administration and Family Services personnel' (Male, 40-49 years old).

Thus, it appears vital that school counsellors' attitudes towards the authorities be improved. This may involve ensuring that school counsellors understand what will occur after a report has been made. In addition, increased communication between school counsellors and the authorities may help to alleviate some of the counsellors' concerns.

### c) Legal ramifications

Some school counsellors also believe that reporting suspected cases to the appropriate authorities is unnecessary as the child wants support or counselling and not to get entangled in legal proceedings. This opinion is quite evident by the views expressed below:

'... as children mature in their sexual identity from 12+ they develop more of an understanding of what sexual abuse is. If they choose to disclose they may be asking for counselling help - not a legal action ... Support may be more what the client is asking for' (personal data not provided).

'There is a big difference between wanting legal action or wanting counselling support. The latter can be sought without reporting' (Female, 30-39 years old).

'I feel it is all too easy for a 'freshman counsellor' or a 'do gooder' to report without fully realising the ramifications or the procedures used after a report has been made' (Female, 20-29 years old).

'I have been in-serviced to death. However, when it comes to the crunch,

it seems better to avoid court action and prosecution for the student, [thus] ensuring that the student is safe and protected. The issues for Primary School students are different from those for high school students' (Female, 20-29 years old).

These views clearly demonstrate that some of the school counsellors would rather avoid court action, but are prepared to provide counselling for the abused child. In particular, victims of less serious types of sexual abuse may need counselling. A multi-disciplinary committee with members from the police, social welfare and medical departments is needed to assess each case. Such co-operation would allow for joint examination of cases. Some cases may be screened out for legal action while, in other cases, counselling or therapy may be recommended for the victim. Establishment of such a multi-disciplinary body may serve to alleviate counsellor concerns about the negative effects of reporting child sexual abuse.

Moreover, reporting is not detrimental to the goals of counselling and under some circumstances may even be helpful. There is some support for this contention in the literature (eg, Beck, 1985; Harper & Irvin, 1985; Watson & Levine, 1989). It is not reporting of abuse itself that is a threat to the therapeutic relationship, maintains Beck (1985), but the manner in which the therapist handles the report which may cause some discomfort.

Thus, school counsellors again need training that emphasizes that reporting child sexual abuse is a vital step in preventing abuse from recurring. Further, school counsellors should also be trained to handle the effects that reporting may have on both the child and their family.

### d) False allegation

It is often asserted that children at times confuse imagined and actual events and people. One component of this assertion is that some children make up stories intentionally, out of malice or for attention. This opinion is quite evident in the comment provided by one of the school counsellors:

'...there is a need not to blindly stumble into the situation. I think a new factor is present now - particularly with



teenagers - the 'Home and Away' mentality, ie, creating drama in their own lives to punish parents' (Male, 30-39 years old).

It is possible that a few such isolated cases may occur. However, for judging the truthfulness of a child's allegations, Finkelhor and Browne's (1985) conceptual model may be particularly useful. This three-step model includes clinical observations of the child sexual abuse indicator list, risk factors for child's vulnerability to abuse and the child's motivation for lying. By following the step-by-step process presented in this model a counsellor is able to check whether a false allegation has been made.

### Limitations

It is also important to note the limitations of vignette-based research. In particular, responses to paper-and-pencil tests about a hypothetical child may not translate into real behaviour, that is, counsellors may be more or less willing to report when a real child is involved. Also, the information provided in the vignettes is only brief. In a real school setting, counsellors may have additional knowledge regarding the child (eg, family environment, level of supervision and support), which is not included in the current vignette-based study, but that may be crucial in their decision-making process.

### CONCLUSION

The views expressed by some of the school counsellors clearly reveal the negative attitudes and doubts they have regarding the competencies and scope of the Department of Family Services and agencies which deal with child sexual abuse. Moreover, some school counsellors appear to be concerned about the repercussions of reporting while others may have some doubts about the truthfulness of a child's allegation.

The main objectives of reporting suspected cases of sexual abuse is to stop the risk for further abuse of the victim, protect potential victims and provide appropriate treatment for the victim. However, if the school counsellor does not have the confidence in the appropriate authorities or policies, or believes that the services

provided by the child protecting agencies are inadequate, then it will be difficult to achieve these objectives. Thus, the findings indicate a need to increase school counsellors' confidence in both the human and other resources available. This may be effectively done by more staff training, better inter-communications between various agencies dealing with child sexual abuse, reformulation of policy guidelines on reporting and investigative procedures, and improved policies for on-going services. ♦

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