



Building Effective Alliances with Child Protective Services and Law Enforcement

When systems that impact children and families collaborate, families are served more effectively and children benefit. Although collaboration is recognized as important, in reality it can be difficult to achieve. Barriers include cross-system issues of confidentiality, minimal relationships, the complexity of each system, and insufficient time and resources.

This document was prepared to assist school personnel to develop effective working alliances with child protective service agency and law enforcement personnel. An alliance is an association between two or more parties, made in order to advance a common goal, and to further the common interests of its members.

School personnel are in a unique position to help prevent child abuse and neglect. For this reason, it is not surprising that schools are the reporting source of more incidents of suspected child abuse than any other institution. Developing alliances with local child protective services (CPS) and law enforcement agencies will assist school personnel to deal with the challenges of reporting suspected child abuse, and will help provide the resources and working relationships that are important to protecting and supporting children. It is best when such alliances are built in the context of planned preparation, rather than working them out in response to problems that arise concerning cases of child abuse and neglect.

There are rewards for schools, child protective services, and law enforcement in building effective working alliances. These include increased rates of identification, better reports, increased communication, and greater support to affected children and families. Research has found that school personnel were more likely to report physical abuse than any other type of child abuse (emotional, sexual abuse, or neglect). However, when teachers were provided adequate training, reports in these other areas increased because teachers are in an ideal position to detect these less obvious forms of abuse.

The following steps are suggested to schools in an effort to build effective working alliances with child protective services and law enforcement.

Step 1. Recruit members and build trusting relationships. To develop the alliance, school administrators should contact their local CPS District administrator and local law enforcement office(s) to identify the members of the alliance. At a minimum the alliance should include school representatives and the key staff involved with investigating reports within both CPS and law enforcement. Membership can also include community providers representing various disciplines who are able to provide support or assistance to families. CPS often has a designated school liaison person assigned by school district. Each entity should be represented on the alliance. A schedule of meetings should be agreed upon to discuss both issues related to the issue of child abuse prevention and issues around working collaboratively.

Leadership is important to building and maintaining a successful alliance – the leader assures that all of the stakeholders are represented on the alliance, can build trust across agencies, is able to manage conflict effectively, and facilitates group discussions. Leadership can be determined collaboratively among the members of the alliance and can rotate. It is important to establish authority for the alliance within the school.

For instance, will the principal be the representative from the school, or will she/he designate to someone? If a designee, then that person needs to know the principal supports the efforts and has given him/her the authority to serve in that role.

Step 2. Clarify values and roles. All three entities play important and different roles in keeping children safe from child abuse. All professionals must be aware of the role each entity plays in child abuse prevention and the unique knowledge and skills they bring to the alliance (2003). Although roles may differ, it is likely that the entities hold a number of core values in common. Clarifying core values and the various roles can help build clarity and cohesion, and can clear up common misconceptions.

Step 3. Identify objectives for the alliance. When developing an alliance with the local child protective services and law enforcement offices, the members should seek clarity on what it is they want to achieve. There are three broad areas such alliances often focus on: prevention, identification, and intervention. Below are some sample objectives for consideration.

- Develop and implement prevention programs for children and parents.
- Increase understanding of the mandated reporting laws of the state.
- Increase knowledge on the warning signs of abuse.
- Consult on the procedure for reporting abuse.
- Understand how to support children in the disclosure process to mitigate future harm.
- Ensure that 100% of suspected child abuse is reported.
- Increase understanding of what happens after a report of suspected abuse is made.
- Increase understanding of how to support students who are the alleged victims of child abuse and neglect in the school system.
- Develop a local resource directory of services that are critical to meeting the needs of children and helping them to focus in school, increasing attendance, decreasing behavioral problems and thereby improving school performance.
- Increase understanding of how to make referrals for services when necessary (food, clothing, housing).
- Develop collaborations with key resources provided with the community who can be called upon for advice or assistance with challenging situations.

Step 4. Develop a common language. Each profession has its own terminology, jargon, and acronyms. To facilitate communication it is important that each party explain technical language, refrain from using acronyms, and work toward a common understanding of key terms.

Step 5. Work through conflict. It is likely that conflict will arise in regard to the handling of child protection reports and investigations. Being able to discuss differences and reach consensus will be a major benefit of the alliance. Discussing what went well and what could be improved with regard to specific cases can help move the alliance forward.

Step 6. Develop protocol. Changing practice requires a commitment to change at all levels as well as a willingness to actually examine and formalize what is working.

Step 7. Evaluate. Adopt an outcome focus to the work of the alliance in order to measure the benefits of cross agency collaboration.

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2010). *Child Maltreatment 2008*. Available from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm#can.

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2003). *A coordinated response to child abuse and neglect: The foundation for practice*.