

# Kindergarten teachers' experience of reporting child abuse in Taiwan: Dancing on the edge<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To explore the experiences of Taiwan's kindergarten teachers when suspecting child abuse.

**Method:** Grounded theory method was used to analyze data from a purposive sample of 20 Taiwanese kindergarten teachers recruited from three kindergartens in Taiwan. Four focus groups lasting between 60–90 min were conducted. Data were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis.

**Results:** The model of “dancing on the edge” was the substantive theory developed from this study. Four major categorical themes emerged from the kindergarten teachers' work with abused children and their families: preserving relationships, avoiding harm, obligation, and maintaining balance. The dance between advocacy and risk is not easily choreographed and balanced. While attempted to avoid harm, teachers feel the pull of obligation and preserving relationships.

**Conclusions:** Reporting child abuse is more than a legal requirement; it is a social process involving a dance between advocacy and personal safety. A critical analysis on the dynamics and interaction between the child, mandated reporters, institutional system, community and society is imperative.

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## 1. Introduction

Identification and reporting of suspected child abuse cases are critical steps in helping abused children. Mandatory reporting laws are in effect in Taiwan, the United States (US) and other countries in an attempt to exercise authority to protect children (The International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse & Neglect, 2007; US Department of Health & Human Service, 2007). The initial medicalization of child abuse was extended to mandate that non-health care professionals also report child abuse. The goal is to detect maltreatment before severe injuries occur (Webster, O'Toole, O'Toole, & Lucal, 2005). Reporting child abuse is a complicated issue. Mandated reporters have failed to report or made inconsistent reports for a variety of reasons including negative consequences for children, families, and themselves and fear the interruption of ongoing therapy (Alvarez, Kenny, Donohue, & Carpin, 2004; Kenny, 2002). As a result of the failure to report, a golden moment to intervene is missed; many children's lives have been lost (King et al., 2006).

Global estimates of fatal child abuse indicate that very young children are in the greatest danger. The rate of child homicide for the 0–4 age group is more than double that of the 5–14 age group (World Health Organization, 2002). Studies of non-fatal child abuse in Hong Kong showed that children 2–8 years of age were the most vulnerable to minor and severe physical abuse (Tang, 1998, 2006). Most kindergarten teachers and nurses in Taiwan have never reported a child abuse case; some have failed to report a suspected case of child abuse. Both groups of professionals have indicated that they are aware of their mandatory reporting role, but few are familiar with the content and the language of the law (Feng, Huang, & Wang, submitted for publication; Feng & Levine, 2005).

Child protection legislation and protocols are complex and vague. Given the ambiguity of the law, mandated reporters are often not confident in filing a report (Levi, Brown, & Erb, 2006; Levi & Loebe, 2004). Professionals have been known to use their own judgment and define maltreatment different from the legal opinion to determine the need to report (Portwood, 1998; Smith, 2006).

Barksdale (1989) found that less experienced professionals tend to encounter greater conflict in reporting child abuse and are less willing to report. Experienced professionals were more confident that reporting would not harm the therapeutic relationship. Though not common in everyday practice, the experience of child abuse has a powerful and long-lasting impact on clinicians' future practice and

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decision making. Mandated reporters' emotional responses to child abuse may have an impact on how they interact with children and their families. Professionals experience a reporting dilemma and indicate a sense of betrayal when reporting a family with whom they have a close and "entrusting" relationship (Flaherty, Jones, & Sege, 2004; Nayda, 2002). In dealing with their own conflict, some might choose not to ask and not to tell (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2007).

School teachers' perceptions of child abuse are important to examine. Children of kindergarten age are most vulnerable because of their developmental immaturity and associated incapability to comprehend and articulate the abuse (Tang, 1998, 2006; World Health Organization, 2002). Kindergarten teachers are in a unique, front line position to observe children who have been maltreated, especially young children who cannot speak for themselves. Besides physical symptoms, teachers are more likely to observe behavioral changes in children than other professionals with less opportunity. In one study, teachers claimed they would pay close attention to child abuse if non-physical signs of abuse emerged (O'Toole, Webster, O'Toole, & Lucal, 1999). Given the critical role of early identification and reporting of child abuse, an in-depth understanding of kindergarten teachers' experiences and perceptions of reporting child abuse is important. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Taiwanese kindergarten teachers and suspected child abuse.

## 2. Method

A qualitative design with grounded theory method was used to explore kindergarten teachers' experience and perspectives of working with abused children and their families. Focus groups were used to collect data from kindergarten teachers.

### 2.1. Sample

Purposive sampling was used to obtain kindergarten teachers with experience in working with abused children and their families. A total of 20 Taiwanese kindergarten teachers were recruited and interviewed using four focus groups from three kindergartens in Taiwan. Ideally, a total of 6 to 8 participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000) are required for a sufficient discussion in a focus group. Due to work schedule limitations, 4 to 7 teachers participated in each group. For this study, teachers' descriptions of their experiences with abused children and their families were the events that were sampled. These events included teachers' interactions with parents and children related to child abuse, children's behavioral problems, conditions that gave rise to the interaction, the range of variation in the interactions, and the dynamics of action.

### 2.2. Procedure

Approval was obtained from the University Institutional Review Board prior to the study. The researchers (JYF, SJC) served as the focus group facilitators, explained the study purpose, rules and rights; teachers provided informed consent and were interviewed in their preferred locations, including conference rooms and classrooms.

The interview guide consisted of nine open-ended questions formulated to obtain teachers' experiences in dealing with suspected cases of child abuse. The first question was framed broadly: "Tell me what child abuse means." Subsequent questions were increasingly specific, requesting information about such topics as how they perceived child abuse, how they detected the different behavioral signs of abused children, what experiences they had working with abused children and their families, opinions about barriers to helping abused children, concerns with the reporting procedure, and confidentiality issues. The facilitators encouraged discussion among members of the focus group. The facilitators asked questions according

to the main and specific topics for each individual group for more in-depth discussion on specific issues. Interview sessions were conducted in Chinese and lasted between 60 and 90 min. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

## 3. Data analysis

Grounded theory was used to analyze the data. The constant comparative method was used to systematically code and analyze data. The principle investigator (JYF), a doctoral prepared researcher, conducted the data analysis which began with open coding, the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding began after the second focus group interview was completed to identify concepts and their properties and dimensions. Categorical themes emerged when the substantive codes were compared with each other. Axial coding was used to connect the categories and subcategories. Properties and dimensions of categories were identified. A core category was selected using process coding, which emerged from the process of open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This core category links the categories and subcategories to explain the relationship between categories and variation among data. Data was independently analyzed by the co-investigator (SJC) to ensure the credibility of the findings.

## 4. Results

The 20 study participants were female ranging in age from 20 to 45 years old. The participants had been kindergarten teachers for six months to 32 years. Their educational level included two with Masters degrees, 17 with Bachelor degrees, and one Associate degree. Most of the teachers had minimal pre-service or on the job training about child abuse issues. The model of "dancing on the edge" (Fig. 1) was the substantive theory developed from this study. Four major categorical themes emerged from the kindergarten teachers' work with abused children and their families: preserving relationships, avoiding harm, obligation, and maintaining balance.

Teachers cautiously managed and adjusted their approach and decision according to their evaluation of the context of child abuse in terms of the severity, parental intention, danger to the child and self, institutional support, and the closeness of their relationships with the child and parents. They attempted to achieve balance and find a rhythm for each case. Every encounter was a challenge for teachers to position themselves as an advocate of justice or a realist to avoid self-harm.

### 4.1. Preserving relationships

Preserving relationships explains the social process of making the decision to report suspected cases of child abuse for kindergarten

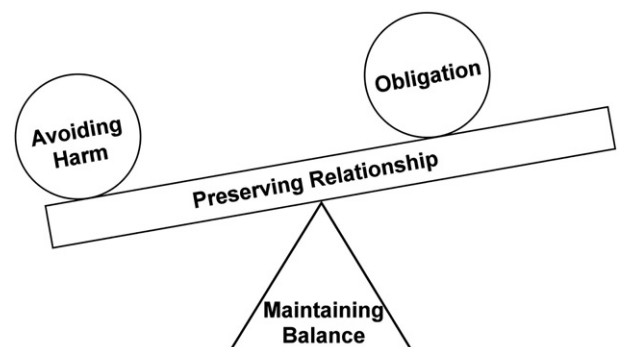


Fig. 1. Dancing on the edge.

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