

Reporting suspicions of child abuse in spotlight at Antioch forum

By Paul Burgarino Contra Costa Times

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ANTIOCH -- "That's a pretty nasty bruise on that child's arm. I wonder where it came from."

"He doesn't seem himself lately. He used to be so outgoing, but now he keeps to himself."

"He says that injury came from running into a table, but it's not at table level. And his story keeps changing."

Those are some of the scenarios that should raise red flags for educators in spotting signs of potential child abuse, Cristina Hickey, community education coordinator for the Child Abuse Prevention Council of Contra Costa, told about a dozen people at a forum Thursday night.

Once a teacher has reasonable suspicion that a child is being abused, the teacher has a legal obligation to report it to police or Children and Family Services, Hickey told parents and instructional aids at Black Diamond Middle School.

"It's one of those things where if you go home and it's still weighing on you and you're worrying about that child, you probably should have reported it," she said. "It's better to be wrong than to carry that with you the rest of your life."

Child abuse can be physical abuse, neglect from a parent or caregiver, sexual abuse or emotional abuse.

Sexual and physical child abuse cases are "very black and white," but neglect and emotional abuse can "have a lot of shades of gray," Hickey said.

Educators are not responsible for investigating child abuse cases, but they are required to refer potential cases to Child and Family Services so they can look into the matter. They also cannot be held liable or be penalized by their employer for reporting suspected abuse.

Child Abuse Prevention Council of Contra Costa County

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, about 80 percent of child abuse cases result from parents, and 17 percent result from someone who is known to the child.

Organizers called for the forum in the wake of lawsuits centered on accusations of abuse of special-needs children in Antioch and Brentwood school districts and delays by school districts in alerting authorities as mandated by law.

Vanessa Gurrola, mother of two Antioch students and president of the district's English learners advisory committee, attended the meeting because many parents in the Latino community have questions about what constitutes abuse.

Hickey has held mandated reporter trainings at every school in those districts in the past two months.

Antioch Superintendent Donald Gill, who also attended Thursday's meeting, visited principals at all 25 district schools over three days this month to discuss mandated reporting.

"My expectation of our district is that we will fulfill our responsibilities as mandated reporters fully and swiftly," he said. "We have not only a legal responsibility but a moral responsibility to be advocates for the children entrusted to us and to be vigilant about their safety."

Contact Paul Bugarino at 925-779-7164. Follow him at [Twitter.com/paulbugarino](https://twitter.com/paulbugarino).

REPORTING CHILD ABUSE

Here are local telephone numbers to report child abuse:

Contra Costa County:

925-646-1680 (central)

510-374-3324 (west)

925-427-8311 (east)

877-881-1116

Alameda County:

510-259-1800

Santa Clara County:

650-493-1186 (north)

408-683-0601 (south)

408-299-2071 (central)

