

Case study: Child maltreatment [preceptor version]

PHN RESIDENCY FOR NEW GRADUATES

Objectives

1. Describe key assessment data to collect in suspected cases of child maltreatment.
2. Determine the public health nurse's legal responsibility in reporting child maltreatment.
3. Describe the process for completing a child maltreatment report.
4. Determine appropriate referral resources for families experiencing child maltreatment.

Case study

The public health nurse (PHN) started seeing Alyssa, a 25-year-old single mother living with Brad (the father of the baby) during her pregnancy. Two months ago, Alyssa gave birth to Tina, a healthy baby girl. She is thrilled to be a new mom and states Brad has been incredibly loving and attentive since she has been home with Tina. Over the next couple of months, the PHN continues to see Alyssa for family home visits and Tina continues to meet or exceed developmental milestones.

However, during recent visits the PHN observes a behavior change in Tina; she cries often now, and Alyssa reports Tina is having trouble sleeping. During Tina's assessment, the PHN determines that Tina has continued to gain weight at an expected rate and has reached developmental milestones. The PHN consults with colleagues related to this situation.

1. **What additional information might the PHN need to help form a more complete assessment and a more accurate analysis of the situation?**

Answer:

- Ask Alyssa's thoughts on why Tina is crying more and sleeping less.
- Find out a typical day for Tina.
- Complete a holistic physical assessment including possible causes for infant crying/irritability (i.e., ear infection, diaper rash, gas pain...).
- Who else takes care of Tina?
- What are the family's support resources (family, social services)?
- Has Tina been routinely followed by a health care provider? Get a release of information to discuss medical concerns with the provider.
- Are there additional health issues for the child?

2. **In completing a holistic assessment of Tina, what might the PHN find if she is being abused? (Describe both physical and emotional symptoms she may be exhibiting)**

Answer:

- Emotional: cries often and has difficulty sleeping, anxious, jittery, withdrawn, difficulty making eye contact, withdraws from contact when being picked up.
- Physical: bruising in different stages of healing, withdrawal from exam, developmental delays.

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The PHN continues visiting over the next three months. During these visits, Alyssa is expressing frustration with parenting. Tina has continued irritability, difficulty sleeping, and her weight gain has slowed; currently putting her at the 25th percentile. At the five-month visit, Alyssa is agitated, and she states Brad got drunk last night and hit Tina. The PHN assesses Tina; she has a bruise on her arm, but otherwise seems unhurt.

- 3. Which statement below best describes the PHN’s legal reporting obligation in the state of Minnesota? ¹**
- A. The PHN has no legal obligation to report abuse but may choose to do so to protect Tina’s welfare.**
 - B. The PHN is legally obligated to report abuse.**
 - C. The PHN has no legal obligation to report abuse, and can choose not to report in order to maintain a relationship with Alyssa.**

Answer: The correct answer is B. The nurse must report if abuse is suspected as the cause for Tina’s behavior. Section 626.556 of the 1998 Minnesota Statute states nurses must report suspected abuse or neglect.

- 4. The PHN proceeds with filing a child protection report. What information is needed to complete this report and how can this report be filed?**

Answer:

- **To file a child protection report, you need to call your county human services department [see: [Resource Guide for Mandated Reporters of Child Maltreatment Concerns \(PDF\)](#)].**
- **Some general information such as identifying information, a summary of the incident (who, what, when, where, why, how) and contact information of the reporter may be included in the report.**

Although it is a choice whether to inform the client that a child protection report is filed, in this case, the PHN informs Alyssa that they are filing the report.

- 5. What factors might the PHN consider in the decision to inform the client that a report has been filed?**

Answer:

- **Relationship with the client**
- **Consideration for future visits**
- **Timing of telling the client (is the abuser present at this visit?)**
- **Is the PHN concerned for their own safety?**

Because Brad is out of the home at the time of the visit, the PHN has determined that for the moment, Tina is safe.

¹ For more information, review [Resource Guide for Mandated Reporters of Child Maltreatment Concerns \(PDF\)](#) from the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS). Also review the full legislation for additional information: [Minn. Stat. § 626.556, the Reporting of Maltreatment of Minors Act](#), provides detailed definitions of child maltreatment. If you are ever unsure about whether you should report, call your local social service agency's child protection unit and a child protection worker will help you decide if a report should be made.

6. Alyssa asks about the next steps in the process after filing the report. What does the PHN tell her?

Answer:

- **Another agency may contact Alyssa, perform an assessment, and provide further follow-up and services as needed.**
- **The PHN will call in a couple of days to follow up with Alyssa.**

7. What education or services might the PHN provide or refer Alyssa to at this time?

Answer:

- **Provide education on mandating reporting.**
- **Assess and provide resource information or referrals to Alyssa. Referrals might include a battered women's shelter, early childhood services, a physician if needed.**
- **Determine if Alyssa has a safety plan.**

Concepts covered

Legal responsibility of reporting, assessment, referral, safety, and completing a child protection report/process

Additional resources

1. US Department of Health and Human Services: Administration for Children and Families: Children's Bureau. (2019). *Child Welfare Information Gateway: Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect*. Online: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/manda.pdf>. Includes information on state laws.
2. Minnesota Department of Human Services. (2021). *Resource Guide for Mandated Reporters of Child Maltreatment Concerns*. Online: <https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Public/DHS-2917-ENG>. Includes information on the logistics of making a child protection report in Minnesota.

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