

INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CONCERNS

COMMUNITY CASES

SHOULD I SPEAK UP?

SUMMARY: Understanding the complexities of child protection when working with minors.

CASE TYPE: Reflective

Reflective cases are internally oriented. These cases invite reflection on one's own place in community engaged work. They typically will not have clear 'right' answers and are open to many interpretations.

FOCUS AREAS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
• Navigating Complex Decisions • Organizational Policies • The Mandated Reporter Role	1. Recognize the unique challenges of supporting children in environments where protection mandates and safety thresholds are inconsistent. 2. Analyze and navigate challenging and uncertain situations regarding the well-being of others. 3. Recognize the importance of determining if you are a mandated reporter in a given role or situation and understanding organizational policies. 4. Understand the necessity of tools, resources, and support networks you can access with questions or to make an official report.

SCENARIO

A mandated reporter is an individual who is legally required to report any suspicion of child abuse or neglect to the relevant authorities (such as social services or law enforcement). Mandated reporter laws vary widely across contexts and locations, but generally the following tends to be true: You do not need proof to make a report; you only need reasonable suspicion or cause to believe that abuse is happening. Making a report does not necessarily mean that an intervention will take place. Instead, it opens a formal assessment where a relevant authority determines if the family needs support or if the child is at risk. Most jurisdictions provide legal immunity to mandated reporters who make a report in good faith, even if the investigation later finds no evidence of abuse. And lastly, in the case that you are a mandated reporter, there can be serious legal consequences for failing to report. For this reason it's important to know if you are legally a mandated reporter in your context. However, even if you are not, anyone is aloud to make reports of suspected child abuse or neglect.

If you are a mandated reporter, most likely you will go through mandated reporter training which will provide details on when and how to report in your particular jurisdiction. If you do not have such training, you should discuss these questions with your supervisor. This case is not the equivalent of mandated reporter training.

With all of this in mind, consider the following scenarios.

Mohammed is a sophomore studying finance and psychology. Addison is a senior studying accounting. During their spring break, both of them will be working with a university club that assists at a week-long camp for children between the ages of 12 and 15 from low resource backgrounds. The following scenarios outline specific situations Mohammed and Addison encounter during their work with the community partner organization.

Scenario A

Addison is assigned to be a “student resident assistant” for the girls living in her camp cabin. One of the students arrived on the third day with noticeable bruising around their upper arm and neck. When she asks them about it, they tell her that yesterday they ran into a branch and fell while playing in the woods with other campers. Such an accident is entirely plausible. The camp’s philosophy is that the children should be able to explore and take small risks. The students are a rough and tumble group, and often end up with bumps, bruises, and scrapes, which is understood by parents to be a part of camp and growing up. Addison is uncertain about this student’s home situation or their prior history, and is afraid to lean into any stigmas about the student or their family based on their background. She is worried that bringing this up with camp staff might make her seem naive or prejudiced, and is unsure what to do next.

Scenario B

On the first day of camp, Mohammed notices one of his fellow student volunteers with whom he’s grown to be friends is paying extra attention to one of the campers, spending more time with them and giving them extra food during meals. The following day while he is in the kitchen washing up, through the screen door Mohammed hears the student say to the camper that they want to meet alone after camp activities are finished. This strikes Mohammed as odd, but he is worried about making any accusations. For one, the student volunteer is from the same community, and knows some of the campers and their families from outside of camp, although Mohammed does not know if this is true of this particular camper. Still, he has a much better understanding of the students and their needs than Mohammed. What’s more, Mohammed has heard a lot of stories about the negative impacts of false accusations. He realizes that if he says anything to the student or to their superiors, it will be clear he is implying the potential for sexual misconduct. Mohammed is wondering if he is reading too much into the situation and is unsure what to do next.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is your first reaction to the scenarios outlined above? Do you feel they require further attention? Do you feel they require a report?
2. If you were in either situation, what might you do to gain more certainty or insight into both scenarios?
3. If you were in either situation, who could or would you reach out to to discuss further?
4. What resources at your institution are available to support you should you find yourself in a situation like this?

FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- **NAVIGATE UNCERTAINTY.** Adults as well as students struggle deeply with the uncertainty of these types of situations. Leaning into the tension, awkwardness, and uncertainty is helpful to do now so that students have a framework for such situations should they arise.
- **SEEK SUPPORT AND RESOURCES.** Direct students to the resources available to them at Notre Dame, in particular the [Reporting Abuse or Inappropriate Behavior with Minors](#) portal and the [Reporting Process](#) guidelines.
- **FIND SUPPORT NETWORKS.** Point students toward campus or programmatic resources (e.g., counselors, supervisors, mentors) that exist to support them in uncertain or difficult situations.

CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What’s one thing you learned or thought about differently during this discussion?
- If you will be working with an organization in the near future, look into their mandated reporter requirements. Inquire with your supervisor or another leader if needed.