

Abstract

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This thesis is based on a pilot study and four research reports that are parts of a larger research project. The following questions were investigated; how many children did well baby nurses and preschool teachers identify as children at risk for maltreatment (study I), how was the content of the mandatory reporting legislation interpreted by the participants and which expressions were used (study II), what signs did the participants responded to and how did they handled their knowledge (study III), and finally what structural factors within child care enhanced or diminished the likelihood for participants to identify children as being at risk of maltreatment and did their interpretation of the mandatory reporting legislation affect the level of reporting (study IV).

The group under study consisted of 12 well baby nurses and 274 preschool teachers in three socio-economically different areas. All of them took part in study I and III, but only the preschool teachers participated in study IV. There were 9 of the well baby nurses and 98 of the preschool teachers that took part in study IV. The well baby nurses were responsible for 3 995, and the preschool teachers for 1 516 children between 0 to 6 years of age. The identification process took place in two steps. First, participants reported how many children they believed to be at risk for maltreatment according to a definition of maltreatment they were given. Secondly, they listed children among which they had observed signs of maltreatment.

The results showed that well baby nurses and preschool teachers observed signs of maltreatment in, and believed that, a considerable number of children they were responsible for were at risk. There were great differences, however, both between and within the two groups under study. Well baby nurses and preschool teachers in the same area most often did not identify or observe signs in the same children. The signs most frequently observed were those of physical neglect etc, followed by signs of emotional unavailability. Nearly a fourth of the identified children were reported according to mandatory reporting obligations. Child Protection Services started an investigation in just half of the reported children. The participants differed in their interpretation of the mandatory reporting legislation. The results showed that interpretations could be classified as either child-focused or parent-focused. The majority of well baby nurses gave interpretations that were coded as child-focused, whereas preschool teachers' interpretations were evenly divided between child- and parent-focused categories. How the preschool teacher's tendency to identify children at risk was related to structural factors was also studied. The experience and education of the participants were found to affect their tendency to report. Those who had worked less than five years in the day care unit and in their profession were found more likely to identify children as being at risk than those who had worked longer. Having a professional degree appeared to be more important in lower SES areas and further education regarding children at risk was more important in higher SES areas. A child-focused interpretation of the mandatory reporting obligations correlated positively with participant's report of children being at risk.

Key words: child maltreatment, prevalence, identification, definition, mandatory reporting

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