



“If I Learn of Abuse When Am I Mandated to Report and What Should I Do Even When I’m Not Mandated to Report?”

Host: David Talbert, Pastor of Small Groups

Guest: Brad Hambrick, Pastor of Counseling

This training is intended to facilitate discussion among small group leaders about how to most effectively steward their shepherding role in the church. It is best used as a prompt for deeper conversations with other leaders, a small group coach, or pastor over small group ministries.

Suggested Training Agenda:

The agenda below is for a 45-60 minute discussion-based training. Some campuses may prefer to address two topics during a 90 minute gathering.

1. Campus Pastoral Team: Welcome and Introduction of Subject (5 min)
2. Training Content (13-15 min)
 - a. Play the video from www.bradhambrick.com/SGabuse during this segment of the training **or**
 - b. Have a staff member teach the training based off the video and supplemental resources
3. Campus Pastoral Team: Summarize Content and Contextualize Current Relevance (5 min)
4. Transition to Discussion Questions (20 min); meant for small group leaders to discuss with one another around tables

Summary of Big Ideas

When someone talks to you about their experience of abuse they are giving you a high compliment. This kind of disclosure is risky and vulnerable. The level of trust they are investing in you speaks to how much they trust you and value your friendship. *Because God loves the oppressed* (Psalm 9:9) we must take seriously our call to be both God’s ambassadors and part of His refuge.

Because God calls us to honor our governing authorities (Romans 13:1-6) we must understand the laws that define our obligation to report abuse. In our country, this understanding begins with knowing the difference between when reporting abuse is mandated and when the victim must press charges. This requires us to understand the different between abuse against a minor and an adult.

Reporting abuse is mandated when it is against a minor. The relevant North Carolina statute reads:

“Any person or institution who has *cause to suspect* that a child under age 18 is abused, neglected, or dependent must make a report to the county department of social services (G.S. 7B-301). As long as the reporter is acting in good faith, they cannot be held liable (G.S. 7B-309).”

What is abuse? Any of these six actions:

1. Inflicting or allowing non-accidental, serious physical injury
2. Creating or allowing a substantial risk of non-accidental, serious physical injury
3. Using or allowing cruel or grossly inappropriate procedures or devices to modify behavior
4. Committing, permitting, or encouraging the rape of the child or other sexual crimes
5. Creating or allowing serious emotional damage to the child
6. Encouraging, directing, or approving delinquent acts involving moral turpitude committed by the child

What is neglect? Any of these five criteria:

1. Does not receive proper care, supervision, or discipline
2. Abandonment
3. Not provided necessary medical care
4. Lives in an environment injurious to the child’s welfare
5. Has been placed for care or adoption in violation of the law.

You may think, “What if I’m not sure?” As citizens, we are not asked to be investigators; the criterion is “reasonable suspicion.” Each report to Child Protected Services (CPS) is vetted by the social worker taking the initial information and their supervisor before any action is taken. Your next question may be, “Who do I call?” The answer to this question is the *child protective services office in the county in which the child has residence*.

Too often when we have legal obligations, we can become sloppy in how to execute our responsibilities. We think about protecting ourselves (i.e., liabilities) more than caring for the person.



When talking to a parent: share your obligation to report, listen to their questions, help them organize their questions, invite them to make the phone call with you, ensure them you'll make sure they get guidance on their questions before the conversation with CPS concludes, make sure the social worker explains what next steps will be taken, discuss with the social worker what safety precautions are advised in the immediate future, take notes to help your friend remember what is being said, and listen to your friend as they process their fears as the conversation concludes. Your job is to (a) make sure your friend faces no preventable surprises, and (b) does not have to remember everything that is being said.

When talking to the minor: everything above is relevant, but when you realize the child may be disclosing an experience of abuse, you should inform them, "I may not be able to keep everything you tell me confidential. If you are in danger, I have a responsibility to make sure you are safe. That may require us to involve people who have the authority to help us make sure you're safe." This is not to dissuade their disclosure, but help protect the child from feeling betrayed by the report that is filed.

When abuse is against an adult, the abuse victim is granted the choice about whether to press charges. This is a legitimately difficult decision. Pressing charges makes their experience public and requires them to go through a legal process that requires cross examination. Allowing the victim to make this decision is part of *restoring their voice and giving them back a sense of control over the major events of their life*. It is wise to make this decision with the advisement of a counselor experienced with abuse.

A common mistake regarding abuse made by churches is premature intervention with the abuser. *Until the victim has a plan and is emotionally ready to withstand reaction of the abuser, no confrontation should occur.* Premature confrontation of the abuser places the disciplinary responsibilities of the church ahead of the well-being of the abused spouse. Discipline should happen WHEN-AFTER the abused spouse is ready for the additional distress this will bring.

If your friend would like you to be part of their being emotionally ready for this next step, the two of you could go through the [Overcoming Codependency](#) study together. This study is meant to be a discipleship-focused curriculum to identifying, understanding, and countering the effects of being in a long-term relationship marked by abuse and/or addiction.

It can be difficult for many Christians or churches to understand why the actions and processes of the church come second in priority to both the well-being of the victim(s) and legal process in abuse cases. Romans 13 says that in criminal matters, the state is God's agent of justice, so this is not putting God second; it is recognizing who God asked to take the lead when a crime has been committed. Putting the needs of the victim first is not a matter of minimizing sin, as much as it is refusing to rush suffering.

Discussion Questions

1. **Understanding:** In your own words, describe the difference between when reporting is mandated and when charges must be pressed by the victim. Again, in your own words, describe the rationale for this distinction and why it is recommended that an abuser not be confronted until the abused spouse is emotionally ready for the additional distress this will bring.
2. **Application:** Role play a conversation where you enact the objectives in the "when talking to a parent" paragraph above. If someone in your group is a social worker, teacher, or in another profession where they have had to file this kind of report, ask them to describe the experience and how they cared for the victim as they fulfilled their responsibility.
3. **Evaluate:** Read Romans 12:9-13:7. Notice how the application point of non-retaliation (Romans 12:9-21, which would only escalate the abuse) does not remove the involvement of legal officials for immoral actions (i.e., sins) which are also illegal actions (i.e., crimes). How does the instruction of this video balance these two sections of Scripture? Remember, Paul wrote this as a continuous letter, not a chapter book of fragmented subjects.

Follow Up Resources¹

- Printable PDF: [Guidelines for Reporting Child Abuse or Neglect](#)
- Blog on Abuse: [How to Develop a Safety Plan for Domestic Violence](#)
- Blog on Abuse: [We Are Equally Sinful. We Are Not All Equally Broken or Toxic.](#)
- Blog on Abuse: [Why We Should Always Teach Romans 13 with Romans 12](#)
- Blog Series: [Marriage with a Chronically Self-Centered Spouse](#)
- Blog: [Where to Begin with Complex Situations?](#)
- Blog: [Four Principles for Thinking Well about Boundaries](#)

¹ All hyperlinks can be found at www.bradhambrick.com/SGabuse if they are unavailable in your printed handout.