

Physical Abuse Scenarios

You are an ER doctor. A mother brings her toddler to the emergency room, very concerned about the pain her child seems to be experiencing in his leg. You have X-rays taken, which show the leg is broken. You ask her how the injury occurred, and she tells you that she was sliding down a park slide with her son on her lap and that immediately afterwards he complained of pain in the leg. The break you see in the X-rays is not an uncommon injury in toddlers, whose caregivers slide with the child on their lap, as the adult's weight can jam the child's leg into the side of the slide, breaking it. You explain this to the mother, and she is stunned; she thought she was being careful and protective.

The injury is completely consistent with the explanation, so there is no reason to doubt the mother's explanation. The injury is accidental in cause, as the parent had no reason to know that sliding with the child was dangerous.

You are a police officer responding to a call from a mother that her son is out of control. Sixteen-year-old Andy and his parents were shouting at each other. He'd been grounded for defiant behavior but was intending to leave the house anyway to meet up with friends. He swore at his mother when she called the police, and his father blocked his way as he attempted to leave, saying "You don't talk to your mother that way" and "You'll do as you're told if you want to live in this house." Andy responded: "I'd have to be frickin' nuts to want to live here" and grabbed the doorknob. His father shoved him away from the door as hard as he could, and Andy hit his head against a bookcase, sustaining a fairly deep laceration to the skull. The father tells you he never intended to hurt his son that way.

Andy has sustained a severe injury, and it was not accidental in cause, even though the father did not intend to cause the injury. A reasonable person would conclude that shoving someone very hard can result in injuries. It does not matter that the boy was very aggravating and testing his parents' patience. Teenage non-compliance is part of normal development, and parents are responsible to exercise emotional control.

A mom arrives at the day care center where you work to pick up 2-year-old Colton who is having a melt-down. The more the mom tries to put his winter clothing on, the more he fights and screams, and the angrier she gets. She jerks him around, forcing his arms through the sleeves and jamming his feet into his boots. Colton starts to cry hysterically and mom yells at him that she'll give him something to cry about. He is unable to calm down. She drags him across parking lot and throws him against the car. You can hear his head thud and hear her scream, "See what you made me do?" She throws him into his car seat and drives off, tires squealing.

Even though you are not in a position to actually see injuries, there is reason to suspect that Colton might have sustained injuries to his head. The injuries cannot be considered accidental, as a reasonable person would conclude upon witnessing the mother's behavior toward Colton that it could result in injuries. Because the mom's behavior appears to be out of control and violent, there is also reason to suspect Colton could be subjected to additional injuries.

When eight-year-old Jesse sits down at his desk in your classroom, you notice that he's trying not to cry. When you ask him what's wrong, he tells you that his dad gave him "a whoopin'" last night. You ask him what "a whoopin'" is, and he says that's when his dad hits him for being bad. When you ask, he says he was hit on his butt, that it doesn't hurt to sit down, and the bad thing he did was push his four-year-old sister down. Jesse says his dad told him to apologize to his sister, and he did, and his dad was happy he did, but sometimes he still feels sad when he thinks about it.

There are no indications of injuries, and the reason for the corporal punishment (hurting his little sister) does not indicate a father who is out of control or enjoys inflicting punishment. It is important to avoid making assumptions when hearing words like "whoopin'" and to find out what the child means when he says it, if possible.

Wisconsin Child Welfare Professional Development System. (2012). Mandated Reporter Online Training - Physical Abuse. Retrieved from <http://wcpds.wisc.edu/mandatedreporter/physicalabuse.html>

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