Sexual Abuse Scenarios

12-year-old Stacy hangs around after class at the end of the day. You chat about things going on at school with her as you organize your classroom, but she’s distracted and isn’t following your conversation. When you are ready to leave, it is clear that she isn’t. Finally, with encouragement, she tells you that she is supposed to stay with her grandparents that night and she doesn’t want to go. Although she is clearly uncomfortable, she finally discloses that the last time she visited, her grandfather took her down to the basement, rubbed her between her legs, then put his hand on her chest over her breasts and told her she was getting to be a big girl and would need a bigger bra soon. She doesn’t want her parents to know, but she just can’t go stay with her grandparents. She doesn’t want you to tell anyone.

Stacy has described behaviors that are sexual contact as defined in the law. It does not matter that Stacy has not specified that the touching was direct contact with her genital or breast area, as touching under or over clothing would still be sexual abuse. Even though she doesn’t want you to tell anyone, you are required to report and cannot honor her request.

You find four-year-old Caitlin in the bathroom at the child care center where you work, having oral contact with the genital area of 4-year-old Liza, imitating oral sex. You separate the children, pull their pants up and talk to them about not doing that again. Liza says it was Caitlin’s idea and that Caitlin told her what to do.

Knowledge of this kind of sexual behavior is unusual for a four-year-old child, giving reason to suspect that Caitlin might have been victimized in the same manner by someone else or may have observed this behavior. (A child accidentally observing this behavior is not sexual abuse, but someone intentionally causing a child to view or listen to this behavior is sexual abuse.) The behavior meets the definition of sexual intercourse in the law. And because Liza has now been subjected to it, both children should be reported as suspected victims.

You are a counselor in a residential care facility where 16-year-old Brett is receiving treatment for behaviors which could not be adequately addressed by community services. He eventually discloses to you that his adult uncle started touching his genitals when he was 11 and first sexually assaulted him anally when he was 13. Brett says it’s the first time he told anyone about it. His uncle hasn’t touched him since he was 14, and he asks you not to say anything to anyone.
Brett has described behaviors that meet the definition of sexual contact and sexual intercourse. It does not matter that it happened several years ago and that there is no reason to believe he is currently in danger. The statutes do not limit your reporting responsibilities to a timeframe within which it must have occurred. Brett is still a child that you have seen in the course of your professional duties and you have reasonable cause to suspect that he has been sexually abused. Brett’s request to not say anything cannot be honored. Furthermore, the possibility that the uncle has access to and might be victimizing other children needs to be considered.

You casually comment to a teenaged girl on the team you coach that a teammate and friend of hers, Julia, seems to be preoccupied today and not playing up to her usual skills. You are surprised when she tells you that it’s because 17-year-old Julia is afraid she might be pregnant. You talk to Julia, and she confides that her boyfriend of a year is a high school senior, 18 years old, that they thought they had taken the proper precautions, but they are both afraid they might have done “something stupid.” She says they are going to Planned Parenthood together after soccer practice to get a pregnancy test. She assures you that she was not pressured in any way to have sex. At the end of practice, her boyfriend comes by to pick her up, and they walk away, holding hands for a few moments.

Julia is 17 years old, and although consensual sexual intercourse with her is a misdemeanor, it is not defined as sexual abuse under legal provisions related to reportable child abuse. There is no reasonable cause to suspect that she was assaulted — she states the sexual activity is voluntary, there is no unusual age span between Julia and her boyfriend, and her description of her boyfriend’s behavior as well as your observations seem to suggest a caring relationship. The fact that the boyfriend is a legal adult (18) and the possibility of Julia being pregnant do not change the other facts: all indications are that the sexual intercourse was completely voluntary.