Early childhood educators are required to report suspected abuse and neglect of young children. What is important to know before and after reporting? How can maltreatment be prevented? How can teachers ensure that maltreated children are safe and secure?

Early childhood educators spend extensive amounts of time with young children, so they are often the first adults to notice signs that a child may be abused or neglected. All educators are required by law to report suspected maltreatment, and can play an important role in preventing and responding to abuse and neglect of young children.

Early childhood professionals, who have an ethical and legal obligation to recognize and report suspicions of abuse, should

• “be familiar with the symptoms of child abuse and neglect, including physical, sexual, verbal, and emotional abuse;
• Know and follow state laws and community procedures that protect children against abuse and neglect; (and)
• Report suspected child abuse or neglect to the appropriate community agency and follow up to ensure that appropriate action has been taken” (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2009, p. 2).

Every day thousands of children in the United States experience maltreatment (see sidebar).

Recognize Maltreatment

The term child abuse refers to three categories of maltreatment:

• physical abuse,
• sexual abuse, and
• emotional abuse.

Child abuse has been defined as any non-accidental injury or pattern of injuries to a child for which there is no reasonable explanation. Child maltreatment also includes neglect, or the failure to appropriately meet children’s basic needs (National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse, 1995). Each state has its own definition of what constitutes abusive and neglectful behavior. Table 1 provides examples of behaviors and omissions that are generally recognized as maltreatment.

Some characteristics and circumstances put some children at greater risk for maltreatment.

• Children who are disabled are twice as likely to be abused and neglected as children without a disability (Kendall-Tackett, Lyon, Taliaferro, & Little, 2005).
• Children younger than age 4 are at the greatest risk for severe injury and death from abuse (CDC, 2009).

Factors that put children at risk for abuse and neglect include those listed in Table 2. It is important, however,
Suspected Child Maltreatment: Recognize and Respond

Table 1. Forms of abuse and neglect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical abuse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Whipping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hitting with a belt, shoe, or other object</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Scalding a child with water that is too hot</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Not letting a child eat, drink, or use the bathroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Tying up a child</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Locking a child in a closet or other confined space</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Violent shaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical neglect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Not meeting a child’s need for food, shelter, and/or clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Leaving children in an unsafe place or situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Not seeking medical attention as needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Scapegoating a child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ridiculing a child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Humiliating a child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Terrortizing a child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional neglect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ignoring a child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Not meeting a child’s needs for affection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Failing to provide emotional support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fondling a child’s genitals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Having intercourse with a child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Having oral sex with a child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Having sex in front of a child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Having a child touch an older person’s genitals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Using a child in pornography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Showing X-rated books or movies to a child</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren, & Gregory, 2002; American Psychological Association, 2003)

Table 2. Factors that put children at risk for abuse

<p>| |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Domestic violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parental substance abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parental mental illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child aggression and other challenging behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Physical, cognitive, or emotional disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Chronic or serious illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Family social isolation and lack of support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Poor parent–child interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Negative parental attitudes toward the child’s behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Inaccurate parental expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Inaccurate knowledge of child development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Olson & Hyson, 2003)

to understand that abuse happens to children regardless of age, ability, and family circumstances.

Children who experience maltreatment are deprived of their most fundamental need: a safe and secure environment. It is often an early childhood educator who first notices signs that a young child is being abused. Sometimes children verbally disclose abuse to those who care for them. A teacher is typically the first to hear about a child’s abuse, most likely because the child sees the teacher as a safe person in whom to confide (Austin, 2000).

Educators are obligated to take action and report suspected abuse and neglect. Therefore, it is important to know and be able to recognize signs of maltreatment. Indications of and reactions to child abuse differ depending on the individual child and the circumstance. However, there are some signs that frequently accompany each type of abuse and neglect. Table 3 provides some common indicators of various types of maltreatment.

In addition to physical injury, child maltreatment can have serious developmental consequences for children, including

• stress levels that disrupt early brain development;
• psychological disorders;
• grief and loss reactions;
• impaired intellectual development; and
• school problems.

Emotional scars can also result, such as

• low self-esteem,
• mistrust,
• anxiety,
• guilt,
• depression, and
• fear of abandonment.
Children who have been maltreated have an increased risk for developing health problems as adults, including alcoholism, depression, and eating disorders (CDC, 2009; Quick, Botkin, & Quick, 1999).

**Report Maltreatment**

In 1974, the U.S. Congress passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (P.L. 93-247), which requires states receiving federal funds for preventing child abuse to adopt mandatory reporting. Today, in all 50 states and in the District of Columbia, early childhood educators are required by law to report suspicions of child abuse and neglect to proper authorities (Nunnelley & Fields, 1999).

In order to report any suspicion, every educator must know the
• state’s definition of child abuse,
• school or center’s policy, and
• any circumstances surrounding the abuse.

Each school and program has its own policy for filing reports, so it is important for teachers to be familiar with the procedures and the other personnel involved in the process. The administrator, guidance personnel, and the state’s child protective services can be sources of information.

Many children who have been abused do not tell an adult, and many who are very young or have special needs are limited in their verbal capacity to do so. Therefore, teachers must be informed and careful observers of each of the children in their care. Familiarity with the common signs described in Table 3 can be very helpful. Keep in mind that this list is not exhaustive. Signs of abuse that draw a teacher’s attention should be documented in detailed notes that are dated, in accordance with the program’s policies.

When a child does verbally disclose an abusive situation, there are several basic guidelines. Austin (2000) provides excellent advice for how to respond immediately and appropriately if a child discloses abuse:

Believe the child, stay calm, accept the child’s feelings, ask open-ended questions, provide reassurance of help, and give support to him or her.

Following the initial conversation with the child, early childhood educators should immediately inform their supervisors in accordance with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Common indicators of abuse and neglect</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical abuse and neglect</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical indicators</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| • Bruises, particularly on back, buttocks, groin, thighs, calves, and center of face  
• Fractures in a child younger than 2, or multiple fractures at different stages of healing  
• Burns, including caustic burns, burns from hot liquid, and burns that show a pattern  
• Lacerations and welts, as from rope burns or whipping  
• Persistently unattended medical problems  
• Extreme uncleanliness  |
| **Behavioral indicators** |
| • Habitual fatigue  
• Extreme fear of punishment  
• Severe withdrawal or aggression  
• Continual hunger  
• Wary of physical contact with adults  
• Reports of abuse  
• Gives inconsistent or unbelievable explanations for injuries  |
| **Sexual abuse** |
| **Physical indicators** |
| • Bruised or swollen genitals  
• Recurrent urinary tract infections  
• Rectal bleeding  
• Blood in urine  |
| **Behavioral indicators** |
| • Difficulty walking or sitting  
• Sleep problems  
• Self-destructive behavior  
• Loss of appetite  
• Extreme withdrawal or aggression  
• Wary of contact with adults  
• Creates artwork depicting sexual themes  
• Shows inappropriate seductiveness  
• Reports having sexual contact  
• Reports having to keep secret an activity with an adult or older child  
• Reports fear of being left alone with an adult or older child  |
| **Emotional abuse and neglect** |
| **Behavioral indicators** |
| • Self-abusive behavior  
• Severe withdrawal or aggression  
• Extreme submissiveness and compliance, socially unresponsive  
• Rocking and thumb sucking  
• Does not play  
• Describes self in negative terms  |

(Nunnelley & Fields, 1999; Kostelnik et al., 2002)
school policy and state and federal laws (Quick, et al., 1999).

Despite the high prevalence of child abuse and the fact that educators are often the first people to witness children’s symptoms, it is estimated that teachers formally report less than 25% of the cases of physical abuse that they encounter. More than 70% of reported cases of child abuse are reported by nonprofessionals, such as family members or other people in the community (USDHHS, 2003).

There are three main reasons why teachers may fail to report their suspicions of abuse or neglect: (1) Educators often lack knowledge of the definitions and signs of maltreatment; (2) they may fear that making a report will lead to retaliation by the child’s family; or (3) they may fear that they do not have adequate proof, and that their suspicions may prove to be inaccurate (Pearson, 1996). These concerns are addressed in the sections that follow.

**Become Knowledgeable**

Educators may be reluctant to report suspected maltreatment because they do not feel confident in their ability to identify it (Crenshaw, Crenshaw, & Lichtenberg, 1995). Results from a U.S. national survey of early childhood educators indicates that approximately two-thirds of the teachers asked believed that the training about child abuse provided by their schools or centers was insufficient (Nunnelley & Fields, 1999).

Educators may not feel confident in distinguishing accidental cuts and bruises from injuries resulting from abuse. If this is the cause for hesitation to report, educators are urged to become more familiar with common indicators of abuse. Participation in professional development opportunities—on-site meetings conducted by knowledgeable professionals, professional conferences and workshops, talking with a school guidance counselor, and accessing information on-line from state child protective services agencies and professional organizations—are ways to enhance knowledge.

NAEYC has produced a set of DVDs titled “Recognizing and Reporting Child Abuse and Child Sexual Abuse,” which is described at www.naeyc.org/store/node/652. In addition, Table 4 provides useful Web sites for gaining further information about child maltreatment.

### Table 4. Learn more—take action against child maltreatment: Helpful Web sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Web site</th>
<th>URL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children</td>
<td><a href="http://www.apsac.org">www.apsac.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Psychological Association: ACT Against Violence Program</td>
<td><a href="http://actagainstviolence.apa.org">http://actagainstviolence.apa.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Help USA</td>
<td><a href="http://www.childhelpusa.org">www.childhelpusa.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Welfare Information Gateway</td>
<td><a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov">www.childwelfare.gov</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDC National Center for Injury Prevention and Control</td>
<td><a href="http://www.cdc.gov/injury">www.cdc.gov/injury</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ispcan.org">www.ispcan.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC]</td>
<td>Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raphe, Abuse, and Incest National Network</td>
<td><a href="http://www.rainn.org">www.rainn.org</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Understand Legal and Ethical Issues

Some educators fear legal retribution from the child’s family if they report suspected abuse. A report of suspected abuse will not make an educator subject to prosecution. The law states that anyone making a legally required or authorized report is immune from civil or criminal liability, as long as the report is made in good faith (Pearson, 1996).

Furthermore, NAEYC’s code of ethical conduct reinforces the law by stating:

When we have reasonable cause to suspect child abuse or neglect, we shall report it to the appropriate community agency and follow up to ensure that appropriate action has been taken. Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children. This principle has precedence over all others in this Code. (NAEYC, 2005, p. 3)

An educator who suspects abuse but does not report it is in violation of both professional ethics and the law.

Document Observations

Teachers may be reluctant to report their suspicions about abuse or neglect because the evidence may appear insignificant and unrelated (Tite, 1993). In reality, legally mandated reports made by teachers actually have some of the highest rates of substantiation (Pearson, 1996).

If a teacher has suspicions of maltreatment, write down and date the observational basis for those suspicions, to aid accurate recollection:

- What physical indications were seen?
- What behaviors were suspicious?
- What has the child said?

It is not a teacher’s responsibility to provide proof; but rather to clearly describe the basis for suspicion. Even if the information reported is not enough for child protection personnel to intervene, the evidence may be held as a suspected case. Then, if further evidence surfaces later, prior reports and documentation combined with more recent evidence may be enough to validate the suspicion. In addition, a child’s case may already be under investigation and new information may make the case more reliable. The crucial reason for reporting is to ensure children’s safety and well-being.

Support Maltreated Children

After suspected abuse or neglect has been recognized and reported, early childhood teachers are in an excellent position to provide support, through classroom interactions and activities, for children who have experienced maltreatment. All
young children need to feel safe in their surroundings. This is particularly true for children who have been maltreated.

Teachers are urged to work in collaboration with others involved in the child’s care (counselors, social workers, family members) to provide nurturing relationships and a supportive environment. Through creation of a supportive and safe classroom climate, early childhood educators can attend to the emotional needs of children who have been abused, and can support the emotional growth of all young children in their charge.

**Provide Nurturing Relationships**

A child who has been maltreated is deprived of a basic human need: an environment in which one feels safe, cared for, and accepted. The maltreated child has experienced loss of trust in one or more adults. Quite possibly the abusing adult is one upon whom the child is dependent, perhaps a parent or other attachment figure.

Early childhood educators play an important role in helping to restore the child’s sense of safety, security, and trust. One of the most fundamental contributions an early childhood educator can make to the safety and well-being of children who have experienced maltreatment is to provide an atmosphere of consistent love, acceptance, and focused attention where rules and routines are consistent and fairly and predictably applied. Every child needs a caring adult-child relationship that is strong and loving to feel safe and secure (Massey, 1998).

Years of research on child resiliency indicate that those children who are able to cope and overcome painful histories are those who have at least one caring adult in their lives. As one researcher has said, “In fact, the most powerful influence in overcoming psychological trauma seems to be the availability of a caregiver who can be blindly trusted when one’s own resources are inadequate” (Van der Kolk, quoted in Gootman, 1996).

A teacher might be able to encourage a dependable family member with whom the child has a warm and trusting relationship (a grandparent, older sibling, parent) to provide extra time, understanding, security, and nurture to the child. For example, that adult might volunteer frequently in the classroom, take the child on relaxing outings, or help the child form new friendships. When appropriate, a safe haven may be sought upon the advice of professionals. The early childhood educator can help that special adult in the child’s life to understand the importance of consistent and loving responsiveness to the child’s relationship needs.

**Establish a Safe, Comfortable Environment**

Through provisions that create a physically and emotionally safe environment, and through thoughtfully planned activities, teachers can attend to the acute emotional needs of children who have experienced abuse and/or neglect. Sensitivity to the safety needs of children who have been maltreated supports not only their emotional well being and development, but frees them to enjoy their out-of-home care and learning environments so that growth and development in all developmental domains can occur. An excellent resource on creating an early childhood classroom environment that supports emotional growth for all young children is titled *The Emotional Development of Young Children: Building an Emotion-Centered Curriculum* (Hyson, 2003).

When a child has had a traumatic experience or the home life has been disrupted, appropriate management of the emotional and social climate of the classroom provides a sense of psychological safety (Kearney, 1999). Providing predictable routines, and consistently teaching behavioral expectations in a positive and affirming manner, also help children know how to behave appropriately and begin to feel safe in the classroom.

Children who have been maltreated can be helped to feel a sense of physical and psychological safety in the classroom and among the adults and children in it as they follow a predictable schedule and routines, and when clear, rational, and reasonable limits are applied in predictable and fair ways (Kostelnik, Whiren, Soderman, & Gregory, 2008).

**Help Children Manage Difficult Emotions**

Children react intuitively to the feelings of adults who matter to them, including their teachers. Educators can develop and exercise control and regulation of their own emotions and the manner in which their feelings are displayed. By portraying self-control, inner calm, courage, and strength, teachers help children begin to learn how to manage their own feelings of fear, anxiety, frustration, anger, and conflict (Quick, et al., 1999).

A number of programs have been designed to help children learn to manage difficult emotions, such as *Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum: PreK-Kindergarten* (Committee for Children, 2002). These resources can be very helpful.
in establishing a psychologically safe classroom climate, peaceful interactions, and respectful relationships. Second Step is designed to

- help children recognize emotional expressions in themselves and others;
- develop emotion-word vocabularies;
- develop empathy and perspective-taking abilities; and
- teach children the skills, language, and knowledge necessary to engage effectively in social problem solving.

This and other such programs, appropriate for the early childhood years, are reviewed in Joseph and Strain (2003).

Children who have been maltreated often experience self-doubt, shame, self-consciousness, anxiety, and debilitating fear. Teachers are encouraged to educate themselves on how to respond to children’s various emotional and social challenges.

For example, children who have been physically or psychologically abused fear the consequences of mistakes or failures. One strategy for alleviating a child’s fear of mistakes or failure is to provide many, varied, and regular opportunities in which the child can experience success. Through increased and intentional teacher-child interactions with children who have experienced abuse and/or neglect, teachers can frequently highlight the child’s efforts, achievements, successes, and strengths (Jackson, 1997).

Additional strategies for helping young children cope with fears and other unpleasant emotions are described in Kostelnik, et al. (2008) and in Hyson (2003).

**Offer Expressive and Cathartic Activities**

Storytelling, art, and play opportunities can provide constructive media and venues for the expression of feelings that may be more difficult for a child to express in other ways and in other contexts. Young children can benefit from opportunities to use toys and other materials to reenact experiences that may have occurred during an abuse episode or traumatic event. Play helps children integrate their experiences and express their feelings.

Developmentally appropriate toys, games, and materials that encourage rich and imaginative play provide opportunities for children to gain a sense of control and satisfaction.

- Rescue vehicles, baby dolls, and doll-house figurines provide props for play through which children may spontaneously express their feelings about experiences of maltreatment (Alat, 2002).
- A flannel board and felt people provide a comfortable, contained space for individual dramatic play and a child’s own personal storytelling.
- The ready availability of art materials may prompt some children to draw, paint, or sculpt about their feelings and experiences. Sometimes children accompany their drawings or other creations with self-talk and private re-enactment.
The purpose of these learning experiences is to give children opportunities to experience the catharsis and comfort that can come from expressing and processing strongly felt emotions. As in any high-quality early childhood program, these are child-initiated and child-directed activities.

Specialists recommend that teachers do not press children to enact abuse-related content through their play activities, or ask the child a lot of questions, but instead just let the play do its own work. A teacher who is an astute, unobtrusive, and objective observer may gain insights into the child’s feelings and needs, and become better able to support the child as a result.

Prevent Child Maltreatment

Early childhood educators also are important agents of child abuse prevention. NAEYC has emphasized the primary prevention role of early childhood education programs (Olson & Hyson, 2003).

Child abuse prevention occurs at three levels.
- **Tertiary prevention** aims to prevent recurrence of abuse in a family where abuse has already occurred.
- **Secondary prevention** efforts are targeted to families identified as being at risk for abuse or neglect.
- **Primary prevention** efforts are provided to the general public through the provision of high-quality early education programs.

NAEYC has directed its current initiatives at the primary prevention level. By establishing reciprocal, respectful, and collaborative partnerships with families, early childhood teachers are positioned to advocate for families, to help adults understand and address challenging behaviors in constructive ways, and to provide developmentally appropriate programs in which children can grow and thrive. NAEYC’s position statement on prevention of child abuse in early childhood settings emphasizes that strong, mutually respectful, and collaborative relationships among families and early childhood educators are essential to minimize the likelihood for child maltreatment to occur in families (NAEYC, 1996). For further information on early childhood educators’ roles in child abuse prevention, see Olson and Hyson (2003) and NAEYC (2003).

* * *

Early childhood educators are likely, during their careers, to care for some children who have experienced, or are experiencing, some form of maltreatment, including child abuse or neglect. Educators have the professional responsibility to know the signs of possible maltreatment, document observations, report suspected maltreatment, and plan strategies to teach in physically and psychologically safe classrooms. While children who have suffered maltreatment will need long-term support and truly nurturing relationships, all teachers can become primary prevention agents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children’s Books That Address Maltreatment</th>
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A boy does not know what to do to help a friend who comes to school with bruises. This tender story evokes the confusion, concern, and eventual hope that one child feels in the face of a difficult problem.

Instead of presenting the specifics of sexual abuse, this guide tells children how to use their feelings to decide whether to allow their bodies to be touched. It introduces two “touching codes” that children can use to protect themselves when they’re uncomfortable.

A mother–child conversation introduces the topic of sexual abuse and ways to keep one’s body private.

Explains to children what to say or do if someone touches your body when you do not want to be touched, especially when the action involves the touching of private parts.

A kind and sensitive school nurse sees that a young victim of child abuse and her abusing mother get help.

Johnson and his sister Beebee realize their mother is not coming back. When a social worker takes them to live with their aunt, they wonder if they will ever feel like a family again.
References


About the Authors

Kristen Mary Kemple, Ph.D., is Professor, Department of Special Education, School Psychology, and Early Childhood Studies, College of Education, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida. Her research interests include social competence of young children, including abuse and neglect. She has designed and conducted a long-term anti-violence study.

Hae Kyoung Kim, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor, Department of Early Childhood Education, College of Education, Towson University, Towson, Maryland. She participated in an anti-violence research project and has provided training for early childhood teachers regarding child maltreatment.

Put These Ideas Into Practice may be found at SouthernEarlyChildhood.org

Memorials In Honor Of

Shirley Reynolds, mother of Susan Carrigan

By Dr. Janie Humphries

Esta Ashcraft, sister of Dr. Janie Humphries

By Lisa Maddox-Vinson

Dr. Laverne Warner

Dr. Nancy Coghill

Venetta Singleton, mother of Beverly Oglesby

By: Dr. Milly Cowles

Mary Abernathy, mother of Mary Jo Huff

By Dr. Pam Schiller

Talmadge Bailey, father of Dr. Becky Bailey

By Dr. Pam Schiller

Jesse O’Bar, Jr., husband of Dr. Ann O’Bar

By Dr. Milly Cowles

Gary Van Atkins

By Dr. Pam Schiller

Tony De Franco

By Dr. Pam Schiller

Contributions made to the Association are used to enhance the development and professional attainment of early childhood teachers and programs throughout the South.