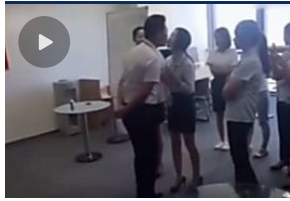


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Don't take pre-schoolers' claims at face value

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While parents might be concerned about possible abuse at childcare centres, it is important for them to be wary of taking the words of a pre-schooler at face value.

First, toddlers have an adequate perception of parental messages at a young age. They can inhibit inappropriate behaviour voluntarily when parents give them a look of disapproval.

Therefore, young children sometimes make up stories about their encounters at childcare centres to get their parents' attention or to feed their parents' sense of mistrust about the childcare centre.

Hearing adult conversations on their misgivings about teachers may also lead young children to engage in "what if" thought experiments.

The child may think: "What if I said my teacher beat me, how will mummy and daddy react?"

Second, children may play along with parents' sense of insecurity or guilt in sending them to the childcare centre.

The child may learn that one way to secure his parents' attention and concern is to make up a story, to get his parents involved in the centre's activities.

Third, children who are five to six years old are capable of telling half-truths, by giving only a partial account of what happened.

With the pressure of intense questioning by parents or caregivers, things are made worse.

The child may be confused and accept the leading questions asked, for instance: "Did your teacher beat you?"

Sometimes, to get out of the uncomfortable situation, the child may "affirm" the beating without considering the consequences.

Perhaps, the appropriate time for parents to gently broach the issue is during the child's playtime, when the child is more relaxed and does not feel coerced into making a claim.

Even then, do not jump to conclusions, but speak to the centre principal or supervisor to verify the claims.

The actions taken by parents have an impact on the child's self-regulation and moral development in future, because children learn through role modelling and the socialisation process of listening to their parents' reasoning.

In entrusting someone to take care of our children, there is a need to build a relationship based on basic trust and understanding.

True partnership requires parents and childcare professionals to make the time and effort to communicate openly and respectfully, to advance their mutual concern for the child's best interests.

As for teachers, it is important to abide by the overarching code of professional ethics to do no harm to children.

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