Ethics and Mandated Reporting

Facts:

- Issues of confidentiality are the most frequently reported ethical dilemmas
- 18% of all ethically troubling situations involve confidentiality
- Reporting suspected child abuse is among the most common confidentiality problem
- 45% of psychologists indicated that breaking confidentiality to report suspected child maltreatment is a common occurrence
- 35% of psychologists stated that it is ethically questionable to report suspected child abuse
- Family therapists indicated that reporting suspected child abuse was the most ethically significant clinical situation experienced
- Internal standards and characteristics of specific situations influence the decision to act outside of professional-ethical guidelines
- Acting outside of mandated child abuse reporting involves a crime
- Mandated reporters who are therapists may see reporting as an unnecessary threat to professional services
- Some may feel that having a reasonable suspicion is not enough to report
- Informing clients of limits of confidentiality is not a consistent practice among therapists – 12% tell clients that everything discussed in treatment is confidential
- 42% of licensed psychologists believed that reporting suspected abuse has negative consequences
- One-third of those who reported child abuse believed their reporting abuse had harmful effects on therapy

An example of a possible appropriate explanation for children and adolescents follows:

Although most of what we talk about is private, there are a few problems that we might discuss that we would have to talk about with others. For example, if you tell me that someone has been hurting or abusing you in some way, I might have to tell the police about it. If you tell me that you might hurt yourself, or even kill yourself, I would definitely have to let your parents know. The same is true if you tell me that you plan to hurt someone else. In fact, I would also have to warn that person. I wouldn’t be able to keep these problems secret because the law says I can’t.

An explanation for adults may say:

If the therapist has some cause to believe that a child – anyone under 18 – is suffering serious physical or emotional injury resulting from abuse inflicted upon the child (including sexual abuse), or from neglect (including malnutrition, medical neglect, etc.), or who is determined to be addicted to an addictive drug at birth, the therapist will probably be required to report that information to appropriate authorities.