

You are a social worker in New York City. One morning you receive instructions to investigate a child protection situation involving a West Indian mother and her twelve year old daughter, living in a West Indian neighborhood in Brooklyn. The daughter has reported the mother. These are the facts so far as you can determine. The mother hit her daughter with a shoe several times, causing some minor bruises and a little swelling, because she discovered that the daughter spent time hanging out on the street rather than going to the library to study, which she told her mother she was going to do. Corporal punishment has been forbidden in the New York Public Schools for over thirty years. It is common in the West Indies, however, although parents generally are careful not to bruise their children or to hit them so hard that swelling occurs. The mother works fifty or more hours a week, and devotes twenty hours a week to a college program. The mother was worried that without corporal discipline her daughter might end up in trouble with the law in the streets. As is common among West Indian immigrant families, the mother came to the United States first, with her daughter following her years later. The daughter says she is resentful about being left behind, and feels she doesn't know her mother very well.

Do you report the mother for child abuse? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: You should not report the mother for child abuse, despite the apparent fact that she inflicted corporal punishment upon her daughter that goes substantially beyond what most North Americans regard as acceptable. Compared with norms of appropriate parental discipline in the West Indies the punishment was somewhat, but not grossly, excessive. Furthermore, in terms of motivation, the punishment did not reflect wanton cruelty on the part of the mother, but, to the contrary, a deep, and, perhaps, desperate, concern to deter her daughter from conduct exposing the daughter to strongly negative influences in the neighborhood. West Indian forms of parental discipline may be ineffective, or counterproductive, in Brooklyn. If so, then you should try to get the mother to recognize this. You also should work with her to develop different means of discipline, and also help, as best you can, to provide her with, or inform her of, social services to assist in fulfilling her responsibilities parent under difficult circumstances.

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