

## Detachment or involvement?

You are a reporter for a large urban daily. The paper plans a major series on poverty. Your editor assigns you to do an in-depth piece on the effects of poverty on children, with special emphasis on what happens when drug addiction becomes part of the story.

You have identified several families willing to be subjects for the story. Three families agree to be photographed — and identified — and you spend four months with them, visiting their homes every day and observing what goes on. You tell them your job is to be an observer — a “fly on the wall” — so you can gather information for this important series.

In one home, you watch as a mother allows her three-year-old daughter to go hungry for 24 hours. You see this same child living in a filthy room, stepping on broken glass and sleeping on a urine-soaked mattress. You know the mother is HIV-positive and you watch as she brushes her daughter’s teeth with the same toothbrush she uses. You see the mother hit the child with full force. You see the little girl about to bite on an electrical cord. Her plight haunts you.

## What do you do to satisfy both your conscience and your responsibilities as a reporter?

- A. Report the mother to the authorities so the girl will be removed from this environment and placed in a foster home. Then write the story.
- B. Write the story first, detailing your observations. After the story has been published, notify the authorities, giving the mother’s address.
- C. Write the story, but don’t identify the mother or child to police or social service authorities. Remember, you are a reporter. You’ve put the information in the newspaper. It’s not your job to act as a police officer.

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### The real story

In the summer of 1997, the *Los Angeles Times* sends reporter Sonia Nazario and photographer Clarence Williams to chronicle the life of children living in poverty with drug-addicted parents. Nazario and Williams spend many hours at the homes of families and watch as addicted parents neglect their children. From the beginning, the journalists describe their jobs as observers — merely “flies on the wall.” They explain that they are not baby sitters and that they will not give the families any money.

After the story is published, hundreds of readers call to complain that the reporters did nothing to help the suffering children. Many feel the reporters immediately should have reported what they saw to authorities. The parents, whose names are used in the story, are later arrested, and the children go to foster homes. The powerful series has a huge impact on readers, who call police to report other child-abuse cases in their communities.

**For discussion:**

Are reporters merely observers? Or is there a time when reporters should go for help?

How would you have handled the story differently, if at all?

Would you have stopped the baby from biting on an electrical cord, as Clarence Williams did? Would you have stopped the parents from screaming at their children, as Clarence did not?