

Child Abuse and Neglect

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Since the early 1970s, Americans have become increasingly concerned about the prevalence of child abuse and neglect. These are disturbing issues and experts agree that the best way to help children is to educate adults and children.

Sometimes, popular literature provides us with a confusing array of facts, data and opinions. Let's look at what is known about child abuse and neglect and what parents, schools and communities can do to protect children.

What Is Child Abuse and Neglect?

According to the Michigan Department of State Police, Operations Division, there are basically four types of child abuse (Child Abuse and Neglect: A Resource Guide; Reporting Child Abuse):

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is physical punishment so severe that it leaves marks, bruises, scars or fractures. Hitting with a closed fist or instrument, kicking, inflicting burns or throwing a child obviously represents child abuse.

Physical Neglect

Physical neglect is the failure to provide the necessities of life for a child. This includes the lack of medical care, inadequate nourishment, inappropriate clothing, lack of supervision and inadequate housing. Locking a child in a closet or not giving an infant or child enough nurturing to allow him or her to grow and develop are also forms of abuse and neglect.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is the exploitation of a child for the gratification of someone else. It may include acts of rape, incest, fondling of the genitals or exhibitionism. Sexual abuse often occurs in a child's own home. In fact, 85 percent of the assailants are individuals that the victims know and trust.

Emotional Abuse/Neglect

Emotional abuse may occur whenever a parent (or other person) vents negative feelings, such as anger and rage, on a child through verbal assault. Sometimes, emotional abuse is not what is done but what isn't done. Children who receive no love, no support and no guidance will carry those scars into adulthood.

The state police also point out that child abuse is not usually a single physical attack or a single act of deprivation or molestation. It is usually a pattern of behavior that takes place over a period of time and the effects are cumulative. The longer abuse continues, the more serious it becomes and the more seriously it injures the child.

Extent of the Problem

It is estimated that between one and six million children in the U.S. are abused or neglected each year, and most sources say those figures are conservative. Some experts guess that one-third of all girls and one-sixth of all boys will be sexually abused or exploited before the age of 14. The number of mistreated children has increased dramatically in the last 10 years but experts are not certain whether the incidence of abuse has

increased, or if the public is now more aware of it and less hesitant to report suspected cases of abuse and neglect.

In Michigan, from October 1984 until August 1985, there were 16,615 substantiated family cases of child abuse and neglect. Of these 16,615 families, 26,376 children, infants through 17 years of age, were victims of abuse and neglect.

- 5,594 children were victims of physical injury
- 3,518 children were victims of sexual abuse
- 9,034 children were victims of physical neglect
- 7,656 children were victims of emotional (social) neglect
- 778 children were victims of abandonment
- 14,115 of the victims were female
- 12,261 of the victims were male

(Data compiled by Sgt. M. G. Huston, Michigan State Police, Juvenile Unit.)

The Abusers

About 90 percent of child abusers are what we would call normal people. They are not emotionally disturbed, mentally ill or criminally inclined. Their personalities are not unusual, although many share common characteristics, such as unhappiness, loneliness, family problems, social isolation and a negative self-concept. Abusers can be anyone who interacts with a child—parents, older siblings, relatives, baby sitters, day care personnel and family day care homes and strangers. They are males and females. They are school personnel who administer excessive corporal and verbal punishment. The abuser can also have an accomplice; the silent, passive spouse who knows about the abuse but does nothing to protect the child.

The Michigan State Police pamphlet, *Reporting Child Abuse*, states that "Many abusive acts begin as more or less acceptable forms of punishment that are carried to excess. Abusive parents, or other persons who interact with the child, may lose control or be unaware or unconcerned about the possibility of physical or psychological injury."

There are some conditions that increase the potential for child abuse and neglect within a family. Among these are:

Immature and inexperienced parents.

Very young parents may not be fully mature themselves. They often have had no experience with children and thus do not have appropriate expectations for the growth and development of their children. These parents may also be ignorant of positive ways to guide and discipline children.

Unrealistic parental expectations.

Parents may mistakenly expect a nine-month-old child to be toilet trained, for example, or a two-year-old child to be able to care for an infant. When the child cannot do what is expected, the parent may become angry and lash out at the child.

Social isolation.

Smaller families and more mobile lifestyles today mean that many families have no relatives nearby to turn to for help with parenting problems or for relief from the responsibilities of child care.

Emotional problems or unmet needs of parents.

Parents sometimes expect a child to meet their own emotional needs for love, affection and self-esteem. When the child fails to do this, the parents may become upset and blame the child. Some parents still have unresolved problems from their own childhood, which cause them to act out against their children.

Parental history of abuse.

Data show that the vast majority of abusing parents were themselves abused as children. Early experiences

taught them that the role of a parent includes hurting children.

Poor problem-solving skills.

Research shows that some parents simply cannot think of any way to discipline or change a child's behavior other than the use of physical or emotional punishment. They are unable to create positive ways to deal with their children.

Extraordinary family life stresses.

Any one of a number of stressful circumstances, such as poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing, chronic illness, family tension, mental illness, drug or alcohol abuse or a sudden crisis can cause parents to strike out at the most vulnerable family members.

Social conditions.

Today, violence is an accepted part of life in the U.S. It is estimated, for example, that by the time an average child is 18 years old, he or she has seen 18,000 murders on television. Also, families today are more isolated from other families than in the past. Neighbors used to keep an informal eye on each other and if there were instances of violence, everyone in the neighborhood knew about them. This openness has changed and now people tend to keep to themselves and avoid involvement. And, in economic hard times, children can be a great financial burden as they consume resources but do not contribute to the family's financial well-being.

The Abused Child

The average age of the physically abused child is 3½. An equal number of boys and girls are victimized. The average age of the sexually abused child is 8 years and 70 percent of these are girls. One-third of all abuse occurs among children under 6 months of age. Estimates nationally are that as many as 4,000 to 5,000 children will die each year due to child abuse.

Some types of children are more likely to be abused than others. Passive, obedient children—especially girls who have been taught never to disobey or disagree with an adult—are often the victims of sexual abuse. These children are unable or afraid to say "no." Children with low self-esteem who are hungry for affection may agree to any activity just for attention.

Children who are especially difficult to care for and create greater-than-usual stresses on parents are more likely to be abused or neglected than other children. Babies, for example, that are premature, of low birth weight or possess difficult temperaments take more time and energy to care for and are less likely to be attractive, lovable or satisfying.

Sometimes, the interaction between parent and child appears to maintain the abuse. Something causes the child to behave in ways that upset or enrage the parent. The parent then takes action against the child, which in turn triggers more disliked behavior by the child.

The Effects of Child Abuse and Neglect

The effects of abuse and neglect on children can be long-lasting or permanent. Resulting handicaps may be emotional, physical, social or educational.

The ultimate effect of abuse or neglect on a child depends on factors such as the relationship of the child to the abuser, the child's age, the nature and duration of the abuse and how the situation is handled by others. It is possible to erase at least some of the effects of child abuse with sensitive intervention by outside helpers. With appropriate assistance, abused and neglected children can grow and thrive.

What to Do About Suspected Abuse or Neglect

If you suspect that a child is in danger of non-accidental physical or mental injury, sexual abuse or is living in a seriously damaging home environment (due to the inappropriate child

rearing practices of his/her parents or guardians), contact the protective services division of your local county department of social services or a law enforcement agency. Even a child can report such abuse. "A report of suspected child abuse or neglect is confidential and the law protects any person from civil or criminal liability, who, while acting in good faith, makes a report of actual or suspected child abuse or neglect." (*Reporting Child Abuse*). You can also report suspected abuse through the national child sexual abuse hotline: **1-800-422-4453**. This is a toll free number.

The State of Michigan Child Protection Law mandates that "A physician, coroner, dentist, medical examiner, nurse, a person licensed to provide emergency medical care, audiologist, psychologist, family therapist, certified social worker, social worker, social work technician, school administrator, school counselor or teacher, law enforcement officer or duly regulated child care provider who has reasonable cause to suspect child abuse or neglect immediately, by telephone or otherwise, shall make an oral report, or cause an oral report to be made, of the suspected child abuse or neglect to the department."

Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect

Experts agree that the best way to fight child abuse is to prevent it from happening. Parents, school personnel and community residents all have roles to play in protecting children.

The parents role.

Parents should be the primary protectors of children.

- Increase your parenting knowledge and skills through education courses or workshops, such as family relations, child development, positive discipline, childbirth preparation and family planning. These courses are offered by local churches, public school adult education programs, the

Cooperative Extension Service and other organizations and agencies. (Your Cooperative Extension Service office has numerous bulletins on such topics.)

- Keep a watchful eye on your children at all times. Unplanned, surprise visits to your child's away-from-home care setting, for example, can reassure you that quality care is being given consistently, not just when visits are expected.
- Talk with your children every day and take time to really listen and observe. Learn details about your children's friends, activities and feelings. Encourage your children to share their problems and concerns with you.
- Teach your children the facts about their bodies. Explain that their bodies belong to them and that they have the right to say "no" to anyone who might try to touch them inappropriately. Children must learn the difference between the "okay touch" and the "bad touch."
- Teach your children self-defense strategies, such as how to get help when needed and how to identify potential trouble or danger.
- Utilize the many good books and resources written for parents and children of all ages discussing the various aspects of abuse.

Help is available for parents who suspect that they are guilty of abusing or neglecting their children. Information and assistance is available from county departments of social services, public health and protective services, school nurses or counselors, clergy. In some areas, there is a HELP telephone number or child abuse hotline to call. Consult the telephone directory or operator for this information. Parents can also call the national child sexual abuse hotline telephone number given earlier.

Self-help groups are often available, too. One of these groups is Parents Anonymous. The members are former child abusers who get together to help and support each other.

The schools' role.

School personnel can support parents in the task of educating children to protect themselves against abuse. There are many teaching methods and materials available, including drama, games, open discussions and materials like comic books, pamphlets, dolls and puppets. In addition, personnel should evaluate the use of corporal and verbal punishment within their school system.

The community's role.

Communities can do many things including:

- Be willing to prosecute abusers and molesters.
- Set up systems for treating the children and their families.
- Support early identification and treatment programs for potential abusers.
- Encourage media to reduce violent themes in movies, television programs, books and records.
- Urge local boards of education to outlaw corporal punishment in schools.
- Support parent education programs.

Resources

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