

# The prevention of child abuse

## PART ONE

### Community resources

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*The literature reveals greater emphasis on the causes and consequences of child abuse than on its prevention. A field study in an Australian capital city shows that while substantial amounts of information and services for people experiencing problems with parenting exist in the community, access to these sources is problematic. Improvements in efficiency or increases in funding will not, by themselves resolve the problem and strategies to change the more fundamental problem of public denial of the problem of child abuse will be required.*

**T**he negative consequences of child abuse are well documented. Children sustain physical damage, hearing and speech impairments; and hindrance to their cognitive, social and emotional development (Ghuman, 1993; Kaufman & Cicchetti, 1989). Depression and behaviour problems follow child abuse (Sternberg et al, 1993). Later, and long term effects of child abuse include youth homelessness, child prostitution, juvenile offending, drug and alcohol abuse, and adult crime (National Child Protection Council, undated).

The causes of child abuse have also been intensively studied. Trickett and Susman (1988) found there were a number of factors differentiating abusive parents from non abusive parents, including isolation and low parenting satisfaction. Bugental, Blue and Cruzcosa (1989) found abused children often had illness or handicap and parents often had high levels of reactivity to stressors. Skurray and Ham (1990) found links with poverty. Preston (1986) found a range of factors in separated families which may contribute to emotional abuse and Ney, Fung and Wickett (1992) found immaturity, marital problems and substance abuse associated with child abuse.

Mothers are usually responsible for physical abuse, although in the most serious forms of abuse which require hospitalisation, a father or male acquaintance is more likely to be the offender (National Police Working Party on Law Reform, 1991). A high percentage of abusive parents are poorly educated, come from disruptive families and are depressed. Some are drug and alcohol abusers and many are socially isolated. Most have low self-esteem, have difficulty in forming close intimate relationships, and may rely on children to gratify their own unmet emotional needs (Ghuman, 1993).

Parents who have been abused as children tend to be those more likely to abuse their own children. The only form of parenting they know is the model provided by their own parents (Stoiber & Houghton, 1991). Abusive parents are often found to have low impulse control and they are easily frustrated, with poor control of aggression. Many perceive their children as being particularly difficult, and also different to other children (Bugental, Blue & Cruzcosa, 1989., Dinwiddie & Bucholz, 1993). Because of their lack of experience and understanding of child development, many parents have unrealistic expectations concerning their child and the child's development. This appears to be especially the case with premature babies, and those babies who do actually have some

early difficulties such as feeding or sleeping problems (Oates, 1982). Parents may not understand how to act on a harmonious level with a child; they may believe all children require harsh punishment, and they may have a fear of spoiling a child (Oates, 1992; Moore, 1985).

Research has consistently found that stressful situations such as unemployment and poverty are associated with child abuse (eg, Skurray & Ham, 1990). Stress can have a great impact on emotions. Parents can feel helpless, they cannot attain their life goals, and may often perceive children as being the cause of their financial and marital problems (Dix, 1991).

Statistics on the incidence of child physical abuse in Australia show an increase in recent years (The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 1992), however a greater willingness to report abuse is likely to account for some (unknown amount) of the increase.

Prevention of child abuse is now emerging as a priority:

Until now, services and programs have largely been directed at meeting the needs of children who already are victims. It is not acceptable to wait until a child is hurt before we take action...the national strategy will recommend a change of focus to help prevent child abuse from occurring in the first place.

(Federal Family Services Minister, Senator Crowley, 1993:6)

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A police discussion paper (National Police Working Party on Law Reform, 1991:8) has suggested that 'denial' has been the common public response to the problem of child abuse. Whilst denial occurs, preventive programs are handicapped (Briggs & Hawkins, 1994a, in press). In the past few years some changes have occurred. Public figures have spoken out about their own experiences. For example, popular TV personality Oprah Winfrey has described the abuse and incest she suffered as a child. (Winfrey, 1993: 10). Australian women's magazines have been featuring similar articles for some time, and the public has been forced by media reports of the deaths of a number of children to acknowledge physical abuse.

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There is evidence that preventive programs can be useful (Briggs & Hawkins, 1994b). Studies by Daro (1993) and Olds (1988), cited in the National Child Protection Council's recently published strategy for prevention of child abuse (*Preventing Child Abuse*), have claimed that home visitation programs, co-ordinated with a system of support that helps parents until the child is 5 years old, have reduced child abuse and paid for themselves.

In order to stem the increase in child abuse, there is a need to change the attitude of society in respect to child abuse from a reactive to a proactive one. Assistance for parents under stress as well as information and education on parenting and parenting problems is needed. Part one of the present research was designed to ascertain what level of assistance, educational information or other preventive resources were available in an Australian capital city (Adelaide, South Australia).

## Method

Preliminary field work consisted of seven group members searching their own neighbourhoods and work areas for information on parenting or avenues of assistance for people with parenting problems. In particular, information regarding child abuse was sought. Visits were made to doctors' surgeries, schools, kindergartens, libraries and Child, Adolescent and Family Health Service (CATHS) centres. Supermarkets and public buildings, public transport and toilets, banks, post offices and council chambers were also scanned for information. This component of the research was designed in part, to simulate the quest for information which might be undertaken by a concerned parent.

Telephone contacts were made with a range of local institutions including government departments and hospitals. Materials including a police discussion paper (National Police Working Party on Law Reform, 1991), newspaper articles, a child protection information kit from the Child Protection Unit (FACS), annual reports (eg, FACS 91-92) and details of legislation relating to child abuse and the mandatory reporting of abuse were obtained. (Community Welfare Amendment Act, 1987). A leaflet with some help agencies listed on its back was obtained from CATHS. Using these sources and the telephone book, a list of over 70 agencies dealing with violence, child abuse and help for parents in the area of child care was compiled. Group members then divided the list among themselves and made contact by telephone with the agencies listed.

Interviews with a number of people were arranged. Discussions were held with academics with research interests in the field of child abuse, with practitioners from Community Health Centres and from domestic violence intervention programs, and with representatives of the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN).

## Results and discussion

### *Lack of easily accessible information for parents.*

The provision of information about the prevention of child abuse is haphazard at best. NAPCAN, the South Australian Child Protection

unit, CATHS, the SA Health Commission, and the Women's Information Switchboard are examples of organisations which make attempts to reach members of the community with brochures containing information relating to child care and support, and the prevention of child abuse. However the field visits showed that information was hard to find. Some of the researchers found no information on parenting problems on display in their sample areas, even where a primary school, two doctors' surgeries, a kindergarten and a Child, Adolescent and Family Health Service (CATHS) centre were visited. In one area, a leaflet on domestic violence found in a rack at a public library was the only information located.

CATHS play a central role in children's well-being and those who actually attend CATHS (with transport and the initiative to get there) do receive parenting assistance and information, but problems were found in the provision of their services. One CATHS centre was found to be closed and services were only available one day per week. That centre has since cut services further to one afternoon per week by appointment only. In another area, the CATHS centre was locked, with service available only for part of one day a week. Most of that time was by appointment only, but no telephone number for appointments was displayed.

A glossy booklet entitled *Your Baby* was supplied to the Working Group by the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN). This is given to all who attend CATHS, at their first visit. A leaflet was also obtained from CATHS which listed help agencies and a 24 hour telephone service for child care problems. However, child abuse as a specific problem needing help was not found mentioned in their literature, other than a warning article in the booklet regarding the shaking of babies.

Group members experienced difficulty in telephoning many of the organisations related to parent support, child abuse assistance or prevention. Some only operated during certain hours or certain days, some had recorded messages operating, which involved a further phone call for assistance, and in some cases callers were advised to contact the police or look in the telephone directory (eg, Sexual and Domestic

Violence Crisis Care Unit, Parent Support Service, Lone Parent Family Support, Mission House, Salvo Youth Line, CATHS).

The information we discovered was compiled after reasonably strenuous efforts by a group of people who were not suffering from the stresses of involvement in child abuse and who had the advantage of practiced research skills and group support. Whether a parent experiencing the distress of personal involvement in child abuse would be able to obtain the assistance needed, even if he or she was well motivated, is unknown. Information and assistance is available, but it is hard to find.

### **Shortage of appropriate counselling services**

There is a shortage of appropriate, or well advertised, counselling or support services for parents, especially in the area of prevention of child abuse. The director of Child Protection Services (Adelaide Women's and Children's Hospital), has been reported as saying that many people would not abuse if they had someone to help them with their problems, and that cries for help usually go unheard. Those parents who admit to a problem usually receive only punishment through the criminal justice system. (Donald, 1993).

Many organisations are associated with, or refer to, the Department for Family and Community Services (FACS) or the Police Department. Unfortunately, public opinion of these departments is often far from favourable and may deter parents seeking assistance before a crisis occurs. The personnel involved also fall under the mandatory reporting laws for child abuse, which bring automatic legal ramifications. This also applies to CATHS personnel. Many maltreating families have a general distrust of all professionals (Ghuman, 1993; Hunt, Hawkins & Goodlet, 1992). This could deter parents from seeking early assistance and was one reason for the formation of NAPCAN which hopes to be seen as a less threatening, more approachable organisation for parents seeking help.

There are some excellent counselling services if they can be found, but they are grossly overworked. For example, the Young Mothers and Single Parents' Association provides counselling for parents and conducts

classes in self-development, but it was found to be completely booked out for a period of five months. This organisation cannot afford to advertise its services to the general public as it has difficulty in meeting the referrals from the police, prison and other community departments. CATHS provides a valuable residential service for mothers in difficulty, but admission involves the necessity to leave other children at home, an alternative often not available in risk families where lack of support and child care assistance is a factor in stress situations.

Media reports have highlighted cases where help had not been forthcoming due to waiting times, resulting in the deaths of young children. The following letter to the editor sums up the situation eloquently and is included for emphasis.

#### **Spare your loved one and yourself**

The story of the death of two-year old Sharlene Meisner 'Jail for toddler's murderer' (*The Advertiser*, 28/9/93), makes heart-wrenching reading - one more episode in the deaths of young children caused, it seems, usually by young parents or a de facto relative. Can this tragedy to so many lives not be prevented? Is there no ready access to a counsellor who will listen, pass no judgment, advise, suggest a further course of help, record no names unless requested, provide a means for the venting of anger (a punching bag?) and an emergency bed to relieve the domestic situation in crisis? Many counselling services exist. Is the real problem that those closest to people in extreme stress, or those under great stress, do not recognise the symptoms and therefore do not seek help in time? If so, let's make people aware, in places they cannot help but see - pubs, social security offices, clubs, on public transport, at the football - wherever such a message may strike home without threatening: 'If you feel the urge to hit out at someone in your household, seek help now. Spare your loved one and yourself.'

(Mrs) D.E. COLSEY, Tranmere  
[Letters to the Editor,  
*The Advertiser*, 5.10.93, p12]

Where parenting services are available, there may be a problem in encouraging their use by people who might benefit. For example, Hunt, Hawkins and Goodlet (1992) found that parents were reluctant to attend parenting courses since they regarded the professionals who conduct these courses with some scepticism and they often preferred to solve their difficulties themselves.

### **High focus on assistance for victims, but low focus on prevention**

Funding appears to be aimed at offering counselling and assistance for victims of child abuse and their families, not for long term prevention, and most of the community organisations investigated seemed to be geared to act after the event, not before. The South Australian Children's Interest Bureau state that they would like to see the concept of better parenting advocated at school level and in courses for intending parents. NAPCAN also deplores the lack of school programs dealing with parenting information. Anecdotal evidence confirms the difficulty in obtaining pre-crisis advice or assistance. One mother with parenting problems who had rung a government agency was referred to a large local hospital. She was put through to the paediatrics section, where staff were basically only concerned with whether the child was ill or injured.

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### **Lack of co-ordination between organisations**

Few of the organisations contacted appeared to be fully aware of what others were doing. Child abuse involves many sections of the community - legal, medical, social, psychological and educational, different organisations have different aims and apparently there is rarely close liaison between each group. This is a problem which appears to exist throughout Australia (Butterworth & Fulmer, 1993).

Lack of co-ordination is also illustrated by the fact that during the whole of the investigation into available resources and information, no-

body in the organisations contacted mentioned the National Strategy for Prevention of Child Abuse recently published by the National Child Protection Council, set up in 1991 by the Federal Government. A copy of the strategy, entitled *Preventing Child Abuse*, was finally obtained directly from the Federal Minister for Family Services.

Though the researchers had anticipated preventive approaches to abuse to be lacking, the extent of the problem surprised them. We discovered that an attitude of denial is still, in practical terms the prevailing one, even though more publicity about the subject and greater acceptance of reporting abuse may have been encouraged by authorities over the past few years. The difficulties in obtaining information regarding assistance, the shortage of counselling services and lack of parenting education in schools and the community, reflect a situation where abuse is only dealt with after the event, rather than anticipated.

## Conclusion

The importance of strategies to prevent child abuse has been recognised by the Federal Government as well as by researchers and community service agencies. A field study showed a large number of sources of information and services exist in Adelaide, but these sources are difficult to exploit at present. Some of the problems are a lack of easy access to existing information and services, a shortage of appropriate counselling services, a disproportionate allocation of resources to assistance for victims rather than for prevention and a lack of coordination between organisations.

The solutions for some of these problems seem to be relatively straightforward in that improved efficiency and perhaps some reallocation of funds is all that is required. While such improvements are recommended, public denial of child abuse remains a major impediment to preventive programs. Strategies to challenge this public denial are the subject of a separate paper to be published in a later issue of *Children Australia*. ♦

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