



# Child Abuse and Neglect

Information from...

## The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

### What Is Child Abuse?

Child abuse occurs when a parent, guardian or caregiver mistreats or neglects a child, resulting in

- injury, or
- significant emotional or psychological harm, or
- serious risk of harm to the child.

Child abuse entails the betrayal of a caregiver's position of trust and authority over a child. It can take many different forms.

**Physical abuse** is the deliberate application of force to any part of a child's body, which results or may result in a non-accidental injury. It may involve hitting a child a single time, or it may involve a pattern of incidents. Physical abuse also includes behaviour such as shaking, choking, biting, kicking, burning or poisoning a child, holding a child under

water, or any other harmful or dangerous use of force or restraint. Child physical abuse is usually connected to physical punishment or is confused with child discipline.

**Child sexual abuse** occurs when a child is used for sexual purposes by an adult or adolescent. It involves exposing a child to any sexual activity or behaviour. Sexual abuse most often involves fondling and may include inviting a child to touch or be touched sexually. Other forms of sexual abuse include sexual intercourse, juvenile prostitution and sexual exploitation through pornography. Sexual abuse is inherently abusive emotionally and is often accompanied by separate and more direct forms of psychological abuse or other forms of mistreatment. Child sexual abuse is not further addressed in this fact sheet. A separate fact sheet dealing exclusively with child sexual abuse is available from the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence.

**Neglect** occurs when a child's parents or other caregivers are not providing essential requisites to a child's emotional, psychological and physical development. Physical neglect occurs when a child's needs for food, clothing, shelter, cleanliness, medical care and protection from harm are not adequately met. Emotional neglect occurs when a child's need to feel loved, wanted, safe and worthy is not met. Emotional neglect can range from the context of the abuser simply being unavailable to that in which the abuser openly rejects the child. While a case of physical assault is more likely to come to the attention of public authorities, neglect can represent an equally serious risk to a child.

**Emotional abuse** involves an attack on a child's sense of self. Emotional abuse is usually found in the context of a long-term problem in a parent's treatment of a child. It is often part of a pattern of family stress and dysfunctional parenting.<sup>1</sup> Emotional abuse frequently co-exists with other types of abuse. Constantly insulting, humiliating or rejecting a child, or saying that a child is "stupid" or "bad", can harm a child's sense of worth and self-confidence.

Other forms of emotionally abusive treatment include forcing a child into social isolation, intimidating, exploiting, terrorizing or routinely making unreasonable demands on a child. Some provinces in Canada now include exposure of a child to violence between the parents as a form of emotional abuse. A recent study of wife assault found that children

witness violence against their mothers in almost 40 percent of violent marriages.<sup>2</sup>

### **How Does Society Respond to Child Abuse?**

Canadian society's primary formal response to child abuse and neglect is through its provincial child protection systems. The provincial laws on child welfare require that all cases of suspected child abuse and neglect be investigated. A variety of actions can be taken if the investigation indicates the child is in need of protection. Responses range from providing counselling and support services to the family, to temporarily or permanently removing the child from the home, to removing the abuser or abusers from the home. In the most serious cases, abusers may be convicted of a crime if the abuse can be proven under the *Criminal Code of Canada*.

In addition, many intervention and education programs are aimed at preventing child abuse and neglect. Prevention programs range from intensive help for families exhibiting a high risk of abuse, to general education programs for school students and the public. Everyone has a role to play in responding to and preventing child abuse and neglect.

### **How Widespread Is the Problem?**

It is difficult to attain a reliable measure of the number of people who are abused at some time in their childhood (the *prevalence* of child abuse). It is also

difficult to estimate the number of children who are abused in a single year (the annual *incidence* of child abuse). There is increasingly reliable information on the number of child abuse cases handled by child protection agencies and police, but the number of children suffering from undiscovered and unreported abuse can only be estimated.

Over the last decade, there has been a dramatic increase in both the reports of suspected abuse and neglect, and the number of children found to be in need of protection. However, it is clear that many cases of child abuse, even some serious ones, are not reported. Individuals and professionals working with children may fail to report because they do not recognize the signs and symptoms of child abuse. In some instances, they may tend to resist admitting to themselves that it is really happening or that it is serious enough to report.

Several other factors inhibit voluntary reporting:

- the nature of family problems related to child abuse and neglect,
- the sense of secrecy and shame surrounding child maltreatment,
- the possible consequences of intervention by child protection authorities or police, and
- many of the victims are young and relatively dependent.

Children may want to disclose their abuse so it can be stopped, but they are often afraid that no one will believe or help them. They may be afraid of what will happen. Abusive parents frequently warn their children not to tell anyone. They may convince the child that the abuse is the child's fault, and that telling someone will only get them into more trouble.

There are no national statistics on the prevalence or incidence of child abuse in Canada. Each province and territory compiles its own figures, using its own definitions. A 1994 report, *Child Welfare in Canada: The Role of Provincial and Territorial Authorities in Cases of Child Abuse*, describes the provincial laws, definitions and child welfare systems that deal with child abuse.<sup>3</sup> A 1996 report, *Child and Family Services Annual Statistical Report 1992-93 to 1994-95*, presents statistical data on child welfare services in Canada.<sup>4</sup> The available data cannot be directly or easily compared among provinces because the information is collected according to different definitions and parameters in each jurisdiction. Nonetheless, the following facts provide some insight into how widespread the problems of child abuse and neglect really are.

In Canada in 1992, approximately 40 000 children were living in foster care or other settings away from their home of origin because of the intervention of child protection authorities.<sup>5</sup> In Ontario, the

number of Children's Aid Society investigations for child physical abuse increased from 3 546 in 1983<sup>6</sup> to an estimated 13 236 in 1993.<sup>7</sup> The number of investigations increased by a yearly average of 27 percent over this 10-year period.<sup>8</sup>

Child abuse and neglect occur in every province and territory, in large cities, small towns and rural areas. While children of all ages are at risk, those 3 years old or less are most frequently investigated for neglect, and children 12 to 15 years old are most frequently investigated for physical abuse.<sup>9</sup>

## **Facts to Consider**

### *Family Factors*

- Child abuse is not confined to any one social class or sector of the population; it cuts across all ethnic, religious, social and economic backgrounds. However, economic disadvantage is a major contributor to child neglect.<sup>10</sup> Poverty also appears to be a risk factor for physical abuse, though not for emotional abuse.<sup>11</sup>
- There is evidence that the prevalence of child neglect is significantly lower in Canada than in the United States, possibly because of the lower rates of child poverty in Canada.<sup>12</sup>
- Causes of stress on families, such as unemployment, can contribute to child maltreatment.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Victim*

- The most potentially serious cases of child abuse involve preschoolers and infants. Younger children are at greater risk of severe injury or death as a result of child abuse.<sup>14</sup>
- "Failure to thrive" in infants is sometimes the result of neglect. In extreme cases, it leads to developmental delays and even death. Many of the mothers of these infants were themselves abused as children.<sup>15</sup>
- A child can be harmed by events that occur before he or she is born. If a pregnant woman uses alcohol<sup>16</sup> or drugs,<sup>17</sup> especially in the first two months of pregnancy, it can cause the child to be born with birth defects or developmental delays.
- The effects of child abuse are profound. Children who are abused tend to experience more social problems and perform less well in school than non-abused children.<sup>18</sup> This can have lasting effects on their social adjustment and success in life.
- Children who are both emotionally and physically abused exhibit the greatest degree of aggression, delinquency and interpersonal problems.<sup>19</sup> Physical abuse inherently conveys a message that is psychologically harmful to the child, but psychological or emotional abuse that is explicit and systematic has more negative consequences for the child than physical abuse.<sup>20</sup>

- Victims of childhood abuse are at greater risk of becoming violent criminals. A study of men in Canadian prisons showed that those who were abused as children were three times more likely than non-abused men to be violent as adults.<sup>21</sup>
- Women who were abused in childhood are more likely to suffer from depression, low self-esteem and suicidal thoughts.<sup>22</sup>

### *The Abuser*

- Abusive parents frequently receive little enjoyment from parenting and are more isolated from the community than non-abusive parents. They have unrealistic expectations of their child and try to control the child through negative and authoritarian means.
- Abusive parents are often afraid of, or emotionally unable to ask for help from, sources of support in their community.
- Most abusive parents have themselves been abused or neglected as children. However, not all victims of abuse go on to assault children. Parents with a history of abuse who do not abuse their children are generally the ones who have developed supportive relations with others.<sup>23</sup>
- Many abusers view themselves as victims in life generally or in the parent-child relationship in particular. They feel that they have lost control of their children and their own lives. When their

children behave in a manner the parents perceive as disrespectful, they lash out in an effort to establish control.<sup>24</sup>

- Because abusive parents often have unrealistic expectations about their child's development and abilities, they demand a level of physical, social and emotional maturity which is not appropriate for the age of the child.

### **Reporting Child Abuse**

Sometimes people think that child abuse is a private family matter. It is not. If you have reasonable grounds to suspect that a child is being abused or neglected, **promptly report** your concerns to the child welfare agency, provincial or territorial social services department or police force in your community. If necessary, a report can be made anonymously.

Reporting is not difficult or time consuming. In all cases, the person reporting is protected from any kind of legal action, provided the report is not falsely made and motivated by malice.

### **Where to Go for Services**

Contact your local

- child welfare agency,
- social service agency,
- police department,
- hospital,
- mental health centre,
- distress centre, or

- other community service organization that provides counselling and support to children and families.

Many of these organizations are listed among the emergency telephone numbers on or near the first page of your local telephone directory.

Children who want help can also call the Kids' Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868.

### **What Can Be Done to Prevent Child Abuse?**

Most abusive parents do not consciously set out to harm their children. If there are more and better efforts to assist troubled families, parents at risk of abusing may be reached and helped before they resort to violence. Prevention is a good investment, in terms of both the personal and social costs that can be saved.

- Parenting education can help parents to better understand normal child development and to have a more nurturing and enjoyable relationship with their children. Positive approaches to parenting can help parents with children of any age.
- Encourage your local school board to develop and implement child abuse prevention programs. Abused children tend to repeat the pattern of abuse, and prevention is one of the most effective means to stop the cycle of violence.
- If a child tells you about an abusive situation or experience, be supportive.

Show the child that he or she is believed, and ensure that the occurrence is promptly reported to the appropriate authorities.

- You can assist by teaching children how to recognize and say no to abusive or exploitative behaviour. Children should know that they have the right to be free from abuse and exploitation.
- You can help the children and adults in your life find information and assistance to prevent an abusive or neglectful pattern from developing.

### **Suggested Reading**

Nanci Burns, *Literature Review of Issues Related to the Use of Corrective Force Against Children*, Ottawa: Department of Justice, June 1993.

Joan E. Durrant and Linda Rose-Krasnor, *Spanking: Should I or Shouldn't I?*, Winnipeg: Department of Family Studies, University of Manitoba, 1995.

National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, *Fact Sheets on Child Sexual Abuse, Wife Abuse, Dating Violence, Abuse of Seniors, etc.*, Ottawa: Health Canada.

Thomas Gordon, Ph.D., *Discipline That Works: Promoting Self-Discipline in Children*, New York: Plume Books, 1991.

United Nations General Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1991.

**Audiovisual:**

The Family Violence Prevention Division of Health Canada has compiled a collection of more than 90 films and

videos on forms of family violence prevention, including child abuse prevention. These can be borrowed from the partner libraries of the National Film Board of Canada.

## References and Notes

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17. J.M. Soby, *Prenatal Exposure to Drugs and Alcohol: Characteristics*



- and Educational Implication of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and Cocaine-Polydrug Effects*, Springfield, Il., Charles C. Thomas, 1994.
18. S. Salzinger, R.S. Feldman, M. Hammer and M. Rosario, "The effects of physical abuse on children's social relationships, *Child Development*, 64(1), 1993, pp. 169-187. R.H. Starr Jr. and D.A. Wolfe (editors), *The Effects of Child Abuse and Neglect: Issues and Research*, London, Guildford Press, 1991.
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