

CHAPTER 3

Preventing child abuse

Parent Support Services Society of BC sees child abuse as part of a continuum of violence in society. In particular, child abuse is a facet of family violence, which has its origins in values and power relations that are systemic and cultural. To understand child abuse, we must look beyond the individual family to community attitudes and structures:

'No act of violence is simply the pitting of one individual against another; each contains deep cultural and psychological meanings. At the same time, no act of violence is merely the expression of a social problem (or a culture), such as poverty or unemployment or male dominance; each is also the personal act of a unique individual.' (Breines and Gordon)

Communities and governments can contribute to family violence if they believe that families should be self-sufficient and therefore offer little support to them, and if they maintain that the privacy of families is a higher value than the well-being of individual members. Societal attitudes which support the use of force to control people also contribute to family violence.

- *Breaking the Pattern: How Alberta Communities Can Help*

Abuse happens in many families. Contrary to the perception created by the media, which tend to focus on extreme situations where children are killed or maimed, most child abuse is unintentional. Unintentional abuse happens in many situations and for many reasons: when discipline gets out of hand; when parents don't understand the needs and abilities of their children; when parents fail to distinguish between their own emotions and reactions, on the one hand, and the behavior of their children, on the other...

As a preventive program, PSS embraces an understanding of child abuse that looks at root causes as well as strategies for change and prevention. In our groups, we offer support to individual parents. But PSS believes that the causes and effects of family violence must be tackled on many levels - political, legal, social and cultural - and we see our work as part of a community-wide movement for social change.

WHAT IS CHILD ABUSE?

It is difficult to talk about child abuse. People often have widely different views about what it is, and we can't provide a tidy or complete definition of child abuse because one doesn't exist. What we can say is that child abuse is a complex matter covering a whole range of issues and beliefs.

There are, however, *descriptions* of child abuse, and these give a sense of what many people mean by child abuse. The following is based on materials from the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence and the BC Institute on Family Violence:

Physical abuse is the application of force to any part of a child's body that results in, or may possibly result in, a non-accidental injury. It may involve a single incident, a pattern or a series of incidents. Child physical abuse is often connected to or confused with discipline and punishment. Among other things, physical abuse occurs when children are beaten, shaken (an infant shaken by an adult can suffer brain damage), kicked, pulled, punched, thrown, burned, smothered and hit with objects.

Child sexual abuse is when a child is used for the sexual gratification of an adult or adolescent, often but not always a family member. It involves the exposure of a child to sexual contact, activity or behaviour, and may include coerced sexual touching, rape, beating sexual parts of the body, voyeurism, sexual ridicule and accusations, and other forms of exploitation, such as juvenile prostitution and pornography.

Note: Physical and sexual abuse rarely occur without some form of emotional and psychological abuse.

Emotional and psychological abuse involves persistent attacks on a child's sense of self, creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. Emotionally abusive behaviour is usually chronic and is often part of a pattern of dysfunctional child rearing. Habitual humiliation, rejection and belittling - such as calling a child stupid or bad - will actively undermine a child's sense of worth and self confidence. Other psychologically abusive acts include forced isolation, namecalling, breaking promises, silent treatment, terrorizing, making unreasonable demands, disrupting a child's other relationships, and destroying a child's property or pets.

Neglect includes acts of omission that significantly impede a child's emotional, psychological or physical development. **Physical neglect** is the failure to adequately meet a child's needs for nutrition, clothing, accommodation, medical care and protection from harm. Emotional neglect is the failure to satisfy the developmental needs of a child to feel loved, wanted, secure and worthy. It ranges from passive indifference to outright rejection.

All forms of abuse and neglect can be damaging to a child. The result is often low self-esteem, including difficulties in creating supportive and trusting relationships. However, intervention can dramatically reduce the long-term impact of abuse on a child.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DISCIPLINE AND ABUSE

"A little tree needs support to grow up. You don't hit or shake a tree if it starts to grow crooked - you give it a pole to grow up alongside. The pole is your support as a parent."

Everyone has a set of beliefs about parenting, discipline and abuse, yet parents may not always be conscious of their beliefs. Conversely, a person may be very aware of the traditions she inherited, yet be unable to adapt her disciplining style to difficult or new circumstances. This is especially true for parents who have little or no support, or who are getting advice from family and friends that is neither helpful nor appropriate (for example, "to spank more and talk less").

People in a PSS group want to learn new parenting skills. It is also vital that they understand where they are coming from. This self-awareness enables parents to make conscious choices about what they want to keep from their existing parenting repertoire, what they want to discard and what they want to add.

People have widely different goals and methods when it comes to disciplining their children.

Discipline isn't
Punishment. It is
Caring and teaching
A child to care for
Themselves.

For example, the goal of one family might be to raise obedient, wellbehaved children, while another family might focus on raising independent, resourceful children. Some parents avoid all forms of physical discipline whereas others occasionally spank their kids. Ideas about why and how to discipline are usually learned in one's own family, and families often reflect cultural values. Different ethnic communities have their own philosophies and practices, not to mention wide variations within those communities.

On top of this, many people are unclear about the differences between healthy discipline and child abuse. For example, a parent who yells a lot might not realize how badly she is scaring and demoralizing her kids - yet yelling isn't usually considered child abuse. There are also potential misunderstandings between different cultures. For example, some communities endorse the use of hands-on discipline and heavy verbal criticism, whereas others may view this as subtle child abuse.

Despite all these complexities, there are real differences between discipline that helps a child, and punishment/abuse that hurts a child. Discipline assists a child to learn something worthwhile or necessary. Punishment may stop behavior in the short term, but discipline has positive, long-term effects on the child, teaching them things that benefit their growth and selfhood. Parents can ask themselves, "What will my child learn from this interaction?" If the child only learns to hit and yell, then the parent is teaching something undesirable.

The differences between discipline and punishment are also based on the *attitude* of the parent and the *feeling* created in the child:

DISCIPLINE:

- thoughtful and deliberate
- uses constructive energy
- Logically connected to the child's behavior
- deals with the present problem
- no danger to the child's physical and/or emotional well being
- reasonable and moderate
- no humiliation or submission
- focuses on the behavior, and doesn't condemn the child
- doesn't take advantage of the child's dependent position
- respects the child's rights
- demonstrates love and affection

ABUSE:

- impulsive and out of control
- uses destructive force
- isn't logically connected to the child's behaviour
- often deals with past problems
- puts the child in danger of physical and/or emotional injury
- unfair and extreme
- humiliates the child, or forces submission
- exaggerates the problem, condemning the whole child as bad
- exploits the power imbalance between parent and child
- disregards the child's rights
- demonstrates anger and hostility

Adapted from the Canadian Red Cross Child Abuse Prevention Program for Adolescents. Used with permission.

PSS does not support the use of corporal punishment. Our policy on this issue neither recommends nor encourages the spanking or hitting of children. Instead, the role of our groups is to help parents find safe, alternative methods of communicating with and disciplining their children.

The roots of child abuse,

A great deal has been written, and many theories advanced, about what causes child abuse, yet there is no simple or one-dimensional answer. The roots of child abuse are a complex interplay of personal, cultural, social and political factors. The following four categories give a very simplified overview of what may cause some parents to abuse their children.

An abusive childhood: If a parent was abused as a child, her self-esteem is probably compromised and she may have difficulty creating and maintaining relationships that are trusting and positive. Because parenting is a primary relationship, these difficulties can create problems for her with her children. There may be a conflict between what she wants to achieve (a trusting, healthy relationship with her children) and her ability to create it. The difficulties can also lead to "generational repetition," in which the parent is at a high risk of abusing or neglecting her own children. The abuse may take a different shape from generation to generation, and the parent may not see the parallels between how she was raised and how she is raising her own children.

Unfulfilled needs/lack of support: Adults often have many unfulfilled needs and may feel there is nowhere to go for help. We all require love, support, acceptance and encouragement in our daily lives, as well as the basics of food, shelter and clothing. Yet many parents lack even these fundamental supports, for a variety of reasons: poverty, social isolation, single or teenage parenthood, a recent move, discrimination, lack of English language skills, having an abusive or unsupportive spouse, etc. When government and community services are unavailable or inaccessible, feelings of loneliness and despair can be overwhelming. In these circumstances, a parent may turn to her children to meet her unmet needs. When the children, full of their own needs, don't fulfil their parent's unrealistic expectations, an abusive episode may be triggered. Once abuse has started, isolation and the lack of community resources can make a bad situation worse.

Parenting children with high needs: Some children are more at risk than others because their parents can't cope with specific difficulties. For example, special children are particularly vulnerable to abuse. This includes children who are hyperactive, have learning disabilities, are premature, sickly or allergic, or are mentally or physically disabled. As well, a child who closely resembles an abusive spouse or any child who is seen as 'different' may be at risk. Children are also vulnerable if they are colicky, the 'wrong' sex, or are perceived to be bad, stupid, selfish or mean to their siblings.

Lack of coping skills: Many families get along reasonably well until something disturbs their equilibrium. A washing machine breaks down, a child is sent home from school for misbehaviour, a telephone is cut off - these are stressful events in any family. But in a family without effective coping skills, they become a major crisis - the last straw - and may lead to abuse.

When there is a genuine crisis, even a stable family can be pushed over the edge. Such crises include a death/disappearance in the family, becoming refugees, money problems, job loss, divorce or major illness.

A parent may lack coping skills for many reasons. Perhaps her own parents modelled poor habits. If she's a teenager, she may be too young to handle the ordinary stresses of parenting. If she's a recent immigrant, she may be unable to deal with the shifting power relations within the family, a change that often occurs when people enter a new country.

The following chart is one way of presenting common ingredients in child abuse situations. However, it is important to recognize that abuse doesn't occur simply because a crisis occurs; rather, it is often a result of entrenched negative factors - such as poor communications skills, poverty and

isolation. Abuse only makes sense when viewed within a broad context of community standards and beliefs.

SOME COMMON INGREDIENTS IN ABUSE SITUATIONS

Parent/Caregiver + Child/Youth + Crisis Situation — Support = Abuse

PARENT/CAREGIVER

Some common characteristics include:

- excessively high expectations
- rigid, strict controlling upbringing
- doesn't understand difference between discipline and abuse
- low frustration tolerance
- unable to control anger
- lacks empathy, and sees her/his needs as more important than child's
- lack of parenting skills
- alcohol and/or drug abuse
- lack of knowledge of child development stages
- parenting style out of sync with larger community (feels loss of parental rights)
- long separation from children (refugee/immigration) and concurrent loss of parenting authority
- history of family abuse (1/3 of adults abused as children will abuse their own children)
- violent experiences outside the home, such as crime, war, torture, political oppression
- low self-esteem
- poor communication skills
- little or no support from partner/spouse

CHILD/YOUTH

Children at risk include:

- children who are difficult to parent (hyperactive, cry excessively, don't sleep well, seldom respond to parent's efforts...)
- children who are physically, mentally or behaviourally challenged
- children who are seen as 'different' (unattractive, adopted, looks like a divorced spouse, child of another partner...)
- children who were unplanned, unwanted or the wrong sex
- children who experienced long separation from a parent, or never knew a parent until family reunification (refugee/immigration experience)
- children who lose 'respect' for their parents and rebel when they perceive the parents to be powerless (poverty/immigration situations)

CRISIS SITUATION

Major issues:

- job loss
- poverty/financial hardship
- separation/divorce
- overcrowding at home
- death in the family
- family reunification
- unwanted pregnancy
- alcoholism/drug addiction
- major illness in family
- relocation in new country/city
- immigration/refugee adjustments

Minor issues:

- 'the straw that breaks the camel's back!'
- broken TV.
- spilled milk
- messy room
- talking back
- coming in late
- hanging out with the 'wrong' friend
- poor school marks
- muddy shoes
- not doing a chore
- breaking a dish

SUPPORT

Support systems that are needed but are unavailable/inaccessible:

- extended family
- religious community
- cultural community
- services in family's language
- parenting groups
- culturally sensitive services
- child-care resources
- friends
- co—workers
- crisis lines
- respite care for parents
- financial assistance

This chart is adapted from the Canadian Red Cross *Child Abuse Prevention Program*.

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Facilitators Handbook