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Child Abuse: A Painful Secret

This publication examines causes and prevention of child abuse.

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A person commits child abuse if he or she shall knowingly, intentionally or negligently causes or permits a minor child to be:

(a) placed in a situation that endangers his or her life or physical or mental health; (b) cruelly confined or cruelly punished; (c) deprived of necessary food, clothing or shelter, or care; (d) place in a situation to be sexually exploited by allowing, encouraging, or forcing such minor child to solicit for or engage in prostitution, debauchery, public indecency, or obscene or pornographic photography, films, or depictions; or (e) placed in a situation to be sexually abused as defined in section 28-319 or 28-320.01 (Sec. 15, Section 28-707 Nebraska Revised Statutes)

Child abuse was not recognized as a serious problem in the U.S. until the 1960s. Data collected by The Children's Defense fund reveals that a child is reported abused or neglected every 13 seconds, of every hour, of every day, 365 days per year. This means that nearly three million boys and girls are confirmed as being abused each year--two percent of the nation's children. In 1995, 140,000 children were treated in hospitals and 2,000 children died from the abuse.

In Nebraska in the last ten years, approximately 8,000 cases of child abuse and neglect have been investigated each year. In 1995, 4,000 Nebraska children (52% female and 48% male) were substantiated victims of child abuse and neglect. **Neglect** was found in 64 percent of confirmed cases, **physical abuse** in 28 percent, and **sexual abuse** in 12 percent of confirmed cases (according to the Nebraska Department of Social Services Report on Child Abuse and Neglect Annual Statistics for Calendar Year 1995). In some cases, more than one type of abuse was involved.

Factors Leading To Child Abuse and Neglect

Why does child abuse occur? Research suggests that three sets of factors put families at risk for child abuse and neglect: **parental characteristics**, **child characteristics**, and the **family ecosystem**--that is, the family system's interaction with the larger environment (Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz (1980).

Parental characteristics. Some or all of the following characteristics are likely to be present in the parent or caregiver who abuse their children:

- The abusing father was physically punished by his parents, and his father physically abused his mother.
- The parent believes in corporal discipline of children and is unable to bond with the children.
- The parent believes that the father should be the dominant authority figure.
- The parent has low self-esteem, is immature, lacking in empathy and is self-centered.
- The parent has unrealistic expectations, has little knowledge of child development and age-appropriate behavior.
- There is persistent role reversal in which the parent uses the child to gratify their own needs, rather than vice versa.
- The parent appears unconcerned about the seriousness of a child's injury, "Oh well, accidents happen."
- The parent is frequently absent from home or leaves children unsupervised for lengthy periods of time.

Child characteristics. Are battered children different from other children? Surprisingly, the answer is often yes--they are often labeled as *unsatisfactory* by their parent--a term that may describe any of the following:

- A "normal" child who is the product of a difficult or unplanned pregnancy, is of the "wrong" sex, or is born outside of marriage.
- An "abnormal" child--who is premature or of low birth weight, who has a congenital defect, who has chronic illness, who has an emotional disturbance.
- A "difficult" child--one who shows such traits as fussiness or hyperactivity.

Family characteristics. Factors in the family system and circumstances that place children at risk are (Garbarino, 1982):

- **Economic distress**, such as unemployment, low income, illness in the family, and inability to pay for medical care.
- **Chemical abuse.** Abusive parents often have high stress in their lives and many use alcohol and other drugs to cope and forget their troubles.
- **Social isolation.** Abusive families are likely to be isolated from their community, with few friends or sources of outside support.
- **Family size.** Parents of two children are 50 percent more likely to abuse their children than parents of one child. The rate of child abuse peaks at five children and declines in larger families.
- **Violence in the family of origin.** Abusive parents are likely to have witnessed violence between their parents and were likely to have been physically punished themselves as children.
- **Violence in the intimate relationship.** Parents who abuse their spouses or intimate partner are more likely to abuse their children than parents whose marriage is peaceful.
- **Family structure.** Children who live with a single parent are more likely to suffer abuse than those who live with two parents--perhaps due to the stresses of single parenthood. Likewise,

children living with a stepparent are more likely to be abused than those living with both natural parents.

- ***Violent subculture.*** Some subcultures appear more tolerant of violent behavior toward children. For example, children who live in an unsafe neighborhood characterized by high levels of violence are at greater risk of being abused than are children growing up in a more peaceful neighborhood.

Signs of Child Abuse and Neglect

There are numerous indications in the child's appearance or behavior that raise the possibility that child abuse or neglect has occurred or might occur. These signs individually are not predictors of child abuse, but if several are evident, suspicion of abuse may be warranted.

Child's appearance

- unexplained or unusual bruises, welts, bite marks, or fractures
- frequent injuries, even if explained as accidental
- often dirty; tired; no energy; hungry
- clothes dirty or wrong for weather conditions
- wears concealing clothing (long sleeves, high neck) to hide injuries
- needs glasses, dental care, or has other obvious medical needs
- comes to school without breakfast, often does not have lunch or lunch money

Child's behavior

- reports injury by parent
- child's story about how injury occurred is not believable
- wary of physical contact; avoids other people, including children
- appears too anxious to please; allows other people to say and do things to him/her without protest
- pleasant, hard to get along with, demanding, often doesn't obey
- frequently causes trouble; breaks or damages things
- shows no enjoyment in other children or toys
- cries often with little or no expectation of being comforted
- avoids physical contact with adults--is shy, frightened of parents
- seeks affection from any adult
- frequently late or absent from school
- engages in delinquent acts or runs away
- begs or steals food
- child is notably destructive or aggressive

Child Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is usually perpetrated by relatives or family members. Following are several possible signs of abuse:

Child's appearance

- has torn, stained, or bloody underclothing
- experiences pain or itching in the genital area
- has sexually transmitted disease

Child's behavior

- appears withdrawn or engages in fantasy of baby-like behavior
- has poor relationships with other children
- is unwilling to participate in physical activities
- is engaging in delinquent acts or runs away
- states she/he has been sexually assaulted by parent/caregiver
- reports sexual advances by adult, friend or sibling

If You Suspect Child Abuse

If you observe, or suspect child abuse or neglect, report it immediately to local law enforcement or the Department of Social Services. **Nebraska Statute 28-711** says: *(1) When any physician, medical institution, nurse, school employee, social worker, or any other person, has reasonable cause to believe that a child has been subjected to abuse or neglect or observes such child being subjected to conditions or circumstances which reasonably would result in abuse or neglect, he or she shall report such incident or cause a report to be made to the proper law enforcement agency or the Department of Social Services on the toll free number 1-800-652-1999.*

(2) Such report maybe made orally by telephone with the caller giving his or her name and address, shall be followed by a written report, and to the extent available shall contain the address and age of the abused or neglected child, the address of the person or persons having custody of the abused or neglected child, the nature and extent of the abuse or neglect or the conditions and circumstances which would reasonably result in such abuse or neglect.

Nebraska Statute 28-716 says: *Persons participating in an investigation or making a report of child abuse or neglect shall be immune from any liability, civil or criminal, that might otherwise be incurred or imposed, except for maliciously false statements.*

Nebraska Statute 28-717 says: *Any person who willfully fails to make any report required by the law shall be guilty of a Class III misdemeanor.* This means: (1) that if you suspect child abuse or neglect, you must report it, (2) you should give as much information about the circumstances as possible, (3) you are immune from suit from any civil or criminal liability, and (4) if you know of abuse but are not reporting it, you are breaking the law.

Impact of Child Abuse

Effects of physical and verbal abuse. Reviews of research on the effects of child abuse suggest the following (Gelles & Conte, 1991; Lloyd & Emery, 1993).

1. Abused children tend to exhibit aggression, low self-esteem, depression, and low academic achievement.
2. Severely abused children suffer more from intellectual deficits, communication problems, and learning disabilities.
3. Adults who were physically abused as children may exhibit low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies, unhappiness, increased risk of alcohol abuse, and are less able to intimately bond with others.
4. Physical injuries sustained by child abuse cause pain, disfigurement and scarring, physical disability, and death.

Effects of sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse has serious, negative long-term consequences (Beitchman, et al., 1992).

1. Among adolescent females, sexual abuse is associated with lower self-esteem, higher levels of depression, antisocial behavior (e.g., running away, illegal drug use), and suicidal attempts.
2. The most devastating effects of being sexually abused occur when the sexual abuse is forceful, prolonged, and involves intercourse, and when the abuse was perpetrated by the father or stepfather.
3. Sexually abused girls are more likely to experience teenage pregnancy.
4. Fear, guilt, shame, sleep disturbances, and eating disorders have been associated with child sexual abuse.
5. Adult males who were sexually abused as children by their mothers revealed several problems, including difficulty establishing intimate relationships, depression, and substance abuse. Sexually abused males tended to develop negative self-perceptions, anxiety disorders, sleep and eating disturbances, and sexual dysfunctions.

Combatting Child Abuse

There are many ways individuals and communities can work together to prevent child abuse and neglect from occurring. Two approaches are: the ***punitive approach***, which views abuse and neglect as crimes for which parents or other adults should be punished, and an ***intervention approach***, which views abuse as a family problem requiring learning appropriate parenting and child development skills and therapy. Usually a combination of both are used in preventing and treating child abuse.

Those who support the ***punitive approach*** believe that one or both parents should be held clearly (i.e. legally) responsible for abusing a child. The abuser should be tried in a court of law, and if convicted, suffer the penalty of violating the law. According to Nebraska statutes:

(1) child abuse is a Class I misdemeanor if the offense is committed negligently; (2) child abuse is a Class IV felony if the offense is committed knowingly and intentionally and does not result in serious bodily injury; (3) child abuse is a Class III felony if the offense is committed knowingly and intentionally and results in serious bodily injury; and (4) child abuse is a Class IB felony if the offense is committed knowingly and intentionally and results in death of such child.

The ***intervention*** approach may involve several interrelated strategies:

(1) family therapy to improve family functioning; (2) counseling or courses to increase parents' self-esteem; (3) anger management training so the parent can constructively deal with the anger and frustration of rearing children, (4) parenting and child-rearing training so the parent can increase their knowledge about age-appropriate behaviors and learn positive child-rearing techniques; (5) devising community support networks for families under stress. These supports may include: a drop-in day care so parents can get relief in stressful times; a parent hot-line to call for information or when the situation becomes stressful; crisis caretakers; crisis babysitters; crisis nurseries and crisis counseling.

If you are a parent under stress:

- Learn to let off steam safely and keep the difficult job of parenting under control. When your child's behavior is troublesome, use the following stress reliever: count to ten, put the child in a safe area, take ten minutes to cool down and relax, take a walk or call a friend.
- Call a local hotline or community agency.

- Call Nebraska Parent Assistance at their toll-free hotline: **1-800-642-9909**
- Call the Child Abuse Hotline at their toll-free number: **1-800-652-1999**

Conclusion

Maltreatment of children is an insidious and destructive behavior pattern with both short-term and long-term consequences. The community, its organizations, churches and people must get involved. If they are unwilling to get involved, the abuse will continue. If it continues, it gets worse and children will die or suffer permanent physical or emotional injury. The abusing parent may go to jail or the family may break up. However, none of this needs to happen. The child must be able to live and grow in a nurturing environment. Most abusive adults know that hurting children is not acceptable and the abuse must stop. Reporting usually stops the abuse, and it forces the parent to get professional assistance and to learn more age-appropriate parenting skills. Remember: ***If it is to be, it's up to me!***

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