Emerging Trends in Child Abuse and Neglect

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Child abuse and neglect continues to be a serious social problem. It captures headlines and national attention with reports of sensational individual cases only to fade into relative obscurity with the notoriety of the case at hand. It has few champions of national stature and little fixed impact on the national psyche or agenda. Why is this? One reason is that children have not been a politically viable constituency—children do not vote. Another is the difficulty society has in placing value, especially economic value, on the problems of children. Child abuse appears remote. It involves other people and other people's children. There is increasing evidence that this is changing.

In the past 25 years we have learned much about child abuse and neglect. We have learned that a child of any age, race, religion, sex, and socioeconomic class can be the victim of abuse and neglect. We know that many more children fall prey to abuse than are ever reported to authorities. We have learned that we must tend to the emotional needs of the child victims of abuse and neglect as much as to the needs of their parents. We have also come to know that abuse and neglect are community concerns; that no one agency or professional discipline can work in isolation to prevent and treat the problem. Case workers must talk to the police, who must talk to the physicians, who must talk to the social workers, who must talk to the teachers, who must talk to the lawyers, who must talk to the judges. And all of us must listen to the children. We have much to learn and much more to do.

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Reports of child abuse and neglect continue to increase yearly. In the most recent national incidence study it was estimated that over 1.5 million children were abused and neglected in 1986. This represents a 74% increase in child abuse and neglect since 1980. The incidence of sexual abuse has more than tripled since 1980. During this same period (1980 to 1986) funding for agencies mandated to do something about the problem of abuse increased by only 2%. In some localities sexual abuse is the number one form of reported abuse. On the other hand, emotional and
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Psychological abuse, which may be the most common forms of maltreatment, continue to be the least reported and reportable. There is little public consensus on what represents psychological maltreatment and little public acknowledgment or understanding of its profound social and economic costs.

There has also been a steady and perhaps growing concern about an increase in the number of "unfounded" cases of child abuse and neglect. Douglas J. Besharov of the American Enterprise Institute and the first Director of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect and other critics point to this increase to highlight what they believe to be society's inappropriate intrusion into the privacy of the family. The intended inference of this view is that these reports are frivolous or are otherwise unjustified. David Finklehor, a prominent scholar in the field of child physical and sexual abuse, has argued that this belief may have its roots in two somewhat divergent sources: one ideological and one pragmatic. From the ideological perspective, primarily identified with politically conservative ideologies, this view is an attempt to reverse a "dangerous expansion of the concept of child abuse." To adherents, the burgeoning number of unfounded reports represents various "family problems," which should not be government's concern.

More recently, however, this position has also been adopted by mainstream administrators of large state child welfare agencies, who have been under enormous pressures. This shift may reflect a reaction to the burden placed on child protective systems by increasing reports, and the public's reaction to recent, highly visible fatalities. Some believe that a more narrow definition of the types of family situations labeled as abuse and neglect would solve this difficult problem. It may be more accurate to view these so-called unfounded reports as unsubstantiated and their increasing number a reflection of inadequately supported child protection services and understaffed child protection staffs. The evidence for an actual increase in the number of unfounded cases, which has been used to support the position that child abuse is being overdiagnosed, is not persuasive. Finklehor has reported that, based on American Humane Association national statistics, there has been no upward trend in the number of unsubstantiated cases since 1976. In addition, the national incidence study mentioned previously actually showed a decrease in the number of unsubstantiated case reports between 1980 (56%) and 1986 (46%).

Substantiation may, in fact, reflect factors other than the validity of a case report. Finklehor has discussed the situation of unsubstantiated case reports and has made some interesting analogies with the criminal justice system. As in the criminal justice system where plea bargaining is used by district attorneys, the issue of substantiation is sometimes used by child protective case workers as leverage in negotiating with a family about counseling or other services. Finklehor has also described interesting overlaps with the criminal justice system and such assessments of efficiency as "rates of arrest" and "conviction." Of all persons arrested on a rape charge only 50% will be convicted. Of all persons arrested on an assault charge only 51% will be convicted. The conviction rate (as a percentage of arrests) for all violent offenses is about 55%. In comparison with these statistics, the substantiation rate for child abuse is actually rather favorable. The similar rates of efficiency reflect the same factors operating in both systems: the importance of the assessment being made, the resources available to carry out the task, and the training of those doing the investigation. To increase the efficiency of the system requires improvements in each area.

CHANGING SPECTRUM OF CHILD ABUSE

There is evidence, too, that the spectrum of serious child abuse is changing. Many of the children currently being hospitalized for serious abuse do not fit the classic description of the battered child of 25 years ago. Rather than the malnourished infant presenting with multiple fractures sustained at different ages, we are more likely to admit to hospital children with severe injuries resulting from sudden, impulsive acts of violence. The perpetrators in these cases are often live-in or babysitting boyfriends. The precipitating events often involve crying, feeding, or toilet training. These scenarios require a different approach to treatment and prevention.

THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

One of the more common claims made in the child abuse and family violence literature in the past 25 years has been the "cycle of violence" hypothesis: that abused children become abusers and victims of violence become violent offenders. Although there has been some evidence for this in the form of small scale clinical reports, some of which describe prior abuse in the family backgrounds of adolescents who attempted to kill or succeeded in killing their parents and of murderers or those charged with murder, these studies are limited by methodologic concerns. The most important concerns involve small sample size, weak sampling techniques, and lack of appropriate comparison groups. Similar difficulties exist with continued on page 474
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studies that claim abused children grow up to become abusive parents.16

Evidence from a study by Widom17 now demonstrates that being abused or neglected as a child does indeed increase the risk for delinquency, adult criminal behavior, and violent criminal behavior. The majority of abused and neglected children do not demonstrate delinquent, criminal, or violent behavior; however, the risk for such behavior is significantly increased when these children are compared with a matched control group. Widom also finds reason to believe that “prevention programs and intervention strategies aimed at buffering at-risk children play a potentially important role in the reduction of further violent criminal behavior.”

These outcomes are just a few of the consequences of abuse and neglect in childhood. This study tells us nothing about the potential for school problems, psychiatric disturbances, failed marriages, or loss of productivity. All of these problems are thought to occur more frequently to the victims of abuse. What then is the real cost of abuse to society?

WHAT DO WE NEED?

What we need is more information. We need to know the true prevalence of the problem and its consequences. We need much greater emphasis on evaluation. We need a greater sense of what we know and what we do not know; what seems to work and for whom; and what does not. We cannot afford to keep what does not work. We need a greater emphasis on multidisciplinary efforts from the federal level down. We need more training for child protective workers and for those in other professional disciplines who deal with the abused child and the family. We need more resources. We also need greater public scrutiny of the work of public agencies dealing with child abuse and neglect.

Concerns for client confidentiality, which often prevent the sharing of information among professionals involved with the reporting of abuse, should not preclude our ability to gauge the success of our efforts or acknowledge and improve upon our failures. In thinking about the problem of child abuse and neglect, we have found the analogy with premature
birth to be helpful.18 To deal effectively with the acute problems that child abuse and neglect present, we should organize our resources around regional centers as we have done for premature infants. This system allows for the development of a critical mass of experts and expertise. It also provides a setting for scholarly research and the development of model programs. However, the most effective way to deal with premature birth is to focus on prevention; the same is true of child abuse. As in the prevention of prematurity, we will need to focus more resources and a "national will" if we are to deal effectively with the problem and prevention of child abuse.

The question remains, "When will we, as a society, do something about child abuse?" One answer has been proposed by William Harris, child advocate and founder of KIDSPAC, a political action committee devoted to children's issues. This time will come, according to Harris, when the cost of doing nothing exceeds the cost of doing something. There is increasing evidence that this time is now.

REFERENCES