Fact Sheet

CHILD ABUSE

by Olivia Pillado

Introduction

Although there have been efforts to curb child maltreatment, it still remains a serious problem (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2004). Children all over the country are neglected, beaten, sexually, and emotionally abused every day. Although some children may be more at risk for victimization, child abuse is often difficult to detect. Various programs have been implemented at the individual and family levels to prevent child abuse and to help victims and perpetrators of child abuse.

Child abuse is defined as harm inflicted on children by anyone including other children and includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, or neglect (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], n.d. a). Signs of physical abuse include unexplained injuries such as welts, bruises, burns, and injuries that are in the shape of objects such as belt buckles and electrical cords. Signs of emotional abuse may include child aggressive or withdrawn behavior, shying away from physical contact with parents or other adults, and/or being afraid to go home. Physical signs of sexual abuse are often difficult to detect by anyone other than a physician (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry [AACAP], 1998) but may include difficulty in walking or sitting, stained or bloody underwear, genital or rectal itching, swelling, redness or discharge. The child may also show behavioral or emotional signs such as difficulty in eating or sleeping, soiling or wetting pants or bed after being potty trained, withdrawing from activities with others, and/or excessive crying or sadness. Victims of prolonged sexual abuse often develop low self-esteem, a feeling of worthlessness, and an abnormal or distorted view of sex (AACAP, 1998).

Scope of the Problem

National statistics

There were an estimated 896,000 victims of child abuse or neglect nationwide in 2002 (USDHHS, 2004). This rate of victimization was 12.3 per 1,000 children, a decrease from the 1990 rate of 13.4 per 1,000 children. More children (60%) suffered from neglect than from any other form of maltreatment. One-fifth (20%) suffered physical abuse while 10% were sexually abused and 7% emotionally abused (USDHHS, 2004). However, this number may be an underestimation due to the possible number of unreported cases. Children are often afraid to tell anyone about what has happened,
and the legal procedures for validating instances of sexual abuse are difficult (AACAP, 1998). In addition, one-fifth (20%) of all victims of child abuse were reported to be victims of “other” or additional types of maltreatment (USDHHS, 2004).

Girls were slightly more likely to be victims than boys. However, infant boys (younger than one year old) were more likely to have fatalities resulting from child abuse or neglect. The highest victimization rates were for the 0-3 age group (16.0 per 1,000 in the population) (USDHHS, 2004).

Out of all ethnic groups, American Indian or Alaska Native (21.7 per 1,000 children of the same ethnicity) and African American (20.2 per 1,000 children of the same ethnicity) children had the highest rates of victimization relative to their national population (USDHHS, 2004). In contrast, the rate of child abuse or neglect victims for White children is considerably lower at 10.7 per 1,000 children of the same ethnicity.

**Risk Factors**

Although there is no specific "abusive personality type," some families are at greater risk for experiencing child abuse (Berk, 1993). Child abuse tends to happen more frequently in families who are isolated and have no friends or relatives, families with parents who were abused as children, families with parents who abuse drug or alcohol, and families with parents who are under a lot of stress or are often in crisis (financial, move often) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], n.d. b). Empirical research has also shown a concurrence of intimate partner violence against mothers and abuse of children up to 50%(CDC, n.d. b). A study by McKibben and colleagues (1989) found that 40-60% of mothers of 32 abused children were also victimized compared to 13% of mothers of 32 matched children with no record of abuse. In a related study, McGuigan and Pratt (2001) found that among at-risk parents, domestic violence during the first six months of child-rearing tripled the likelihood of physical abuse occurring during the child's first five years.

**Reporting guidelines**

In most states, reporting suspected child abuse or neglect is required by law. Federal agencies have no jurisdiction to intervene in child abuse and neglect cases, therefore the state agency must be contacted. Guidelines require that if there is suspicion of child abuse, the child should be taken to a quiet area and encouraged to give enough information to evaluate whether abuse may have occurred. The child should be told that the adult believes him/her, that the child isn’t bad and has the right to tell about the abuse.

If abuse or neglect is suspected within the family, the state's Child Protection Agency should be contacted. If the abuse is outside of the family, it should be reported to the police or district attorney’s office (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 1999). If there is no toll free number available, the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-A-CHILD will provide assistance.
Promising Strategies

Various preventive strategies have been used to combat child abuse. In an increased effort to reduce risk factors leading to child maltreatment, preventive services used include respite care, parenting education, housing assistance, substance abuse treatment, day care, home visits, individual and family counseling, and crisis and domestic violence services (USDHHS, 2004).

Remedial services have also been made available to families who have already suffered child maltreatment. Such services include family-based services such as counseling and family support, foster care services, and court services such as proceedings to determine temporary custody of the victim (USDHHS, 2004).

References


Related Publications on Child Abuse


Internet Resources

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: http://www.aacap.org

California Department of Social Services: http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/cdssweb/default.htm


County of Los Angeles- Department of Children and Family Services: http://dcfs.co.la.ca.us/Default.htm

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control Home Page: http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc

National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information: http://www.calib.com

Prevent Child Abuse- California: http://www.pca-ca.org/