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✓ Understanding Child Abuse

Illinois Department of Children and Family Services

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Understanding Child Abuse

Historical Perspective

The maltreatment of children has been with humanity for as long as history records. In Biblical times infanticide was widely practiced either as part of a religious ceremony or as a means of population control. Children have been sold into slavery and as recently as 200 years ago were permitted to be maimed as a way of enhancing them as beggars. In the United States, during the Industrial Revolution, child labor was common and conditions so horrible that large numbers of children were killed, were permanently injured, or committed suicide.

The attitude, which is pervasive to some extent even now, is that children are possessions of their parents or guardians and as such are subject to their will without fear of outside intervention. The first significant child abuse case (in 1874), called the "Mary Ellen case" after the child involved, was brought to court by members of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, there being no official advocate for abused children at the time. Eight months later, the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was formed. It was not until 1881, however, with the enactment of an anti-cruelty law by the state of New York, and funding of \$30,000 by New York City, that the society was recognized as a quasi-official agency which at last began to assert itself as something more than a charitable organization. In 1910, California passed a law making it illegal to abuse children, but if found guilty the perpetrator was ordered to pay the fine to the dog

catcher. The proverb "spare the rod and spoil the child" remains a pervasive educational philosophy in this and many other countries.

Consequently, since corporal punishment is fully sanctioned by a large part of American society, it is not surprising that the definition of child abuse is often difficult. There is sometimes a very fine line between discipline and abuse. David Gil proposes the following as the definition: "intentional, non-accidental use of physical force, or intentional, non-accidental acts of omission on the part of a parent or other caretaker interacting with the child in his care, aimed at hurting, injuring or destroying the child."¹ Even this definition has its limitations since the assessment of intent is frequently difficult.

Illinois Law

In 1965, when all of the other 50 states were either planning or enacting such legislation, Illinois passed its Abused Child Act. This act remained basically unchanged from the time of its enactment until late in 1973, except for amendments enlarging the description of abuse and neglect.

A major amendment went into effect in September, 1973, expanding the number and categories of people required to report cases of suspected abuse to the Department of Children and Family Services. Previously, those required were physicians, surgeons, dentists, osteopaths, chiropractors, podiatrists, Christian Science practitioners, and hospital personnel. Added in 1973 were

school teachers and administrators, registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, directors or staff assistants of nursery schools and child day care centers, law enforcement officers, and field personnel of the Illinois Department of Public Aid.

The law was also amended to require the Department of Children and Family Services to initiate investigation of each case within 24 hours of receipt of the report.

On July 1, 1975, a new law, the Abused and Neglected Child Reporting Act, replaced the old Abused Child Act. The new legislation contains many of the provisions of its predecessor, with several important changes, some made to meet regulations of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare for funding child abuse programs.

Perhaps the most far-reaching change is the extension of immunity from civil or criminal liability to all who report suspected abuse to the Department. Previously, only those persons required by law to report were assumed to be acting in good faith and afforded such protection.

The age of children covered by the law is raised from 16 to 18, a federal requirement. There are clear definitions of abuse and neglect. Abuse is "any physical injury, sexual abuse or mental injury inflicted on a child other than by accidental means by a person responsible for the child's health or welfare." The inclusion of sexual abuse and mental injury is a federal requirement. Neglect is defined as "a failure to provide, by those responsible for the care and maintenance of the child, the proper and necessary support, education as required by law, or medical or other remedial care recognized under State law, other care necessary for the child's well-being; or abandonment by his parents, guardian or custodian; or subjecting a child to an environment injurious to the child's welfare."

Professionals in the previous law remain the same, with the addition of coroners. Also, "any other person" is allowed (but not required) to report.

As in the previous act, the Department must maintain a Central Registry to provide statistical information about the incidence of child abuse and neglect in the state and to aid in program planning. The new law emphasizes the confidentiality of individual cases.

National and Statewide Statistics

It is difficult if not impossible even to estimate the incidence of child abuse and neglect in the United States. One problem is that state laws differ so widely. Illinois law, for instance, requires the reporting of abuse and neglect. Other states require abuse reporting only. Much depends upon how well the laws and the avenues of reporting are publicized. In Florida, for example, there were only 17 reported cases of abuse in 1970, but in 1971 a hotline number was established and an aggressive publicity campaign carried out. Now the state receives thousands of reports annually.²

Illinois statistics demonstrate both an increase in reporting since enactment of the first child abuse law in 1965 and trends showing the influence of legislative changes in subsequent years.

In fiscal year 1977, some 7,700 suspected cases of abuse and neglect were reported to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services—1,000 more than the year before and 16 times the amount recorded when the state's child abuse statute was enacted in 1965.

The 1973 amendments to the law (adding school personnel, police, social workers, and other professionals to those required to report cases of abuse and neglect) caused

a change in the average age of children who come to the Department's attention. In a study covering July 1, 1965 through June 30, 1973, over 54 percent of the children involved in such reports were under the age of three. Through the first six months of fiscal year 1977, only 29.4 percent of abuse reports involved children under three years old, although the *number* of younger victims continues to increase.

Corresponding percentage increases were noted in reported cases of abuse to school-age youngsters, six through 15 years old—from 25 percent of the total in fiscal year 1973 to nearly 44 percent in the first half of fiscal year 1977.³

Abusive Pattern

The abuse of a child by his parents results from the interaction of several factors.⁴ First the parent or caretaker must have the potential to abuse. This potential develops over many years and has several causes. The way in which the parents themselves were raised is vitally important in determining their potential to abuse. Almost invariably, parents who physically abuse their small children have been reared in a similar manner. At least the relationships they had as small children with their own parents left a great deal to be desired. They were poorly "imprinted" with the highly important ability to "mother" a small child. They were expected to perform extremely well and were punished severely when they failed to live up to those expectations.

The marital relationship is another important area to be considered in assessing the potential to abuse. Abusive parents are generally of a clinging, dependent type who offer little emotional support to their spouse. Most abusive parents are isolated individuals who cannot trust or rely on

others around them, including family, friends, and neighbors. As a result of the inability to reach out in times of crisis, the individual retires behind a wall of isolation, shutting himself off from the supportive resources needed to help cope with daily problems. Another step in determining the potential to abuse is exploration of the expectations parents have of their child or children. Most parents who abuse their small children frequently and very unrealistically expect their children to perform far beyond their capabilities in terms of tasks appropriate to age.

In addition to the parent with the potential to abuse, a second aspect of the abusive pattern is the child himself. The child is usually seen differently by his parents primarily because he fails to respond in the expected manner, or perhaps he really is different in that he is handicapped, hyperactive, or retarded. Often a perfectly normal child is seen as bad, willful, stubborn, spoiled, or slow. However, if the child himself is a good baby who doesn't cry much, sleeps all night, eats well, and is generally responsive, he may escape abuse, even where there is a significant potential for it.

The third element in the abusive pattern is the crisis which sets the abusive action into motion. The crisis can be major, such as a family death, loss of employment or parental illness, or it may be a minor irritation, such as the baby crying, milk being spilt, or the television set breaking down. Whatever the severity, the actual act of abuse usually occurs during a crisis.

The cycle, therefore, is frequently an emotionally deprived parent who receives little or no support from his spouse, extended family, or friends and who turns to the child for gratification, love, and attention. When the child is either unable or unwilling to meet the parental demands and

needs, he is punished. The cycle is repeated when the punished child later becomes the next generation's abusive parent.

Treatment Approach

The first obligation in responding to a report of suspected child abuse is to insure the physical safety of the child. That involves rather intensive interviewing to determine the aspects of the pattern outlined above. Where safety of the child is in doubt, the Department of Children and Family Services may immediately petition for temporary guardianship or detention. Some children can be returned to their own home after the family has been contacted and has agreed to begin receiving services. When the child remains in his own home, initial work is aimed at identifying the underlying problems, be they marital, economic, health, or other. This is followed by a sincere attempt to find solutions so that the child is no longer the focus of parental frustration. In this process a thorough assessment must be made of the way in which the family members relate to one another.

Placement of the child outside the family home is not an easy answer and may cause more serious problems for him. The Department of Children and Family Services attempts whenever possible to save the home for the child rather than to save the child from the home. At the same time, it must be remembered the child is the primary concern in this situation. If the Department has, in its considered opinion, a choice between taking a child away from an intolerable situation and maintaining the family unit at the probable expense of the child's well-being, the Department must opt for the child.

Decisions of this kind are never easy. Placement of a child often means isolation

from the only security he has ever known. It means trauma, which can leave permanent emotional scars. Also, because of the environment of abuse and neglect, the child usually has behavior problems which make him difficult to place. He can be enuretic, withdrawn, or unable to trust. He can also be demanding and impulsive. Many times the placements fail, and the child's feelings of worthlessness are only reinforced. Basically the worker must decide whether the harm caused by the child remaining in the home is likely to be more destructive than the harm caused by removal and placement. Ideally, placement of the child outside the home is seen as temporary while the family receives needed services.

The Worker's Feelings

One of the difficulties in responding to reports of suspected abuse is that the caseworker must first learn to handle his own feelings so they will not interfere with his attempts to help the family. Parents who abuse their children are often difficult to approach, as they usually deny the abusive behavior as well as having marital or personal problems. Often there is provocative, demanding, hostile behavior toward the caseworker or other authority. The abusive family is frequently fearful of close relationships and has limited capacity to trust. Because of this, initial contacts with the family are vitally important in conveying concern for the family as a whole and the belief they can be helped.

New Approaches

In addition to traditional casework services offered by the Department of Children and Family Services, many new ideas for helping the abusive family have been tried and developed throughout the country.

Among these are Parents Anonymous groups which are self-help gatherings organized along the general guidelines of Alcoholics Anonymous. Parents meet together on a regular basis led by a person with knowledge of group process and child abuse. The meeting provides an opportunity to express confused and angry feelings as an outlet for frustration.

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services awarded some \$655,000 in grants for fiscal year 1977 to prevent or control child abuse. The grants went to 33 organizations in 20 cities and towns to support programs such as crisis centers for families that might have to break up if emergency help were unavailable, local networks of services for abused children and their families, community awareness programs on child abuse, and day care and family counseling to avoid removing children from their homes. Several grants were also awarded to Parents Anonymous groups throughout the state.

The use of temporary caretakers, people expert in home management and child development who are placed in the homes of abandoned children as an alternative to taking state custody of them, is appearing in local programs in Tennessee, New York State, and Ohio. DCFS is supporting proposed legislation to allow a similar program in Illinois.

Interest in the battered child has been aroused from time to time, usually by sensational news reports of child abuse incidents. While new programming occasionally occurs as a result of these increased levels of interest, it is important that each community maintain concern and involvement in planning for better utilization of community resources to deal with the problem of child abuse.

Footnotes

1. David Gil, *Violence Against Children* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).
2. Stephan J. Cohen and Alan Sussman, "The Incidence of Child Abuse in the United States," *Child Welfare*, 54:6 (June, 1975), 432-443.
3. Statistics in this section are taken from DCFS collections, the most recent of which is a paper entitled "Child Abuse/Neglect Data, July-December, 1975, and July-December, 1976."
4. C. Henry Kempe, M.D., and Ray E. Helfer, M.D., *Helping the Battered Child and His Family* (Philadelphia: J.D. Lippincott Co., 1972).

Additional References

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- Ebeling, Nancy B., and Deborah A. Hill, eds. *Child Abuse: Intervention and Treatment*. Acton, Mass.: Publishing Sciences Group, Inc., 1975.
- Fontana, Vincent J. *Somewhere a Child Is Crying*. New York: Macmillan, 1973.
- Giovannoni, Jeanne M. "Parental Mistreatment: Perpetrators and Victims," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 33 (1971), 649-657.
- Helfer, Ray E., M.D. *The Diagnostic Process and Treatment Programs*. Washington: Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1975. (OHD 75-69)
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- Steele, Brandt. *Working with Abusive Parents from a Psychiatric Point of View*. Washington: Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1975. (OHD 75-70)
- Tracy, James, and Elizabeth Clark. "Treatment for Child Abusers," *Social Work*, 19:3 (May, 1974), 338-342.

Materials Available from DCFS

Pamphlets

The Abused and Neglected Child Reporting Act. Effective July 1, 1975.

What Everyone Should Know about Child Abuse. Simple, colorful pamphlet describing types of abuse, its causes and effects, ways of helping abusive parents, and what members of the community can do to help combat the problem. Printed on the back: complete list of DCFS abuse and neglect reporting telephone numbers. 15 pages. (A Scriptographic booklet by Channing L. Bete Co., Inc.)

If You're Thinking about Reporting Child Abuse. Information directed primarily toward personnel required to report suspected child abuse cases to the Department; informative as well for the general public. Also available in a Spanish-English issue. 5 pages.

Posters

DCFS offers posters aimed at school personnel, hospital personnel, and the general public on reporting suspected cases of child abuse. Also available: "Child Abuse Alert," a small card suitable for posting by the telephone with local child abuse reporting telephone numbers.

Films

Children in Peril. 16mm color. Documentary study of child abuse developed by ABC-TV. Features interview segments with two authorities on child abuse, plus a group therapy session with mothers imprisoned for child abuse. Gives some insight into various treatment models:

Parents Anonymous, lay therapists, day care centers that involve both children and abusive parents. 30 minutes. (Distributed by NAMH Film Service)

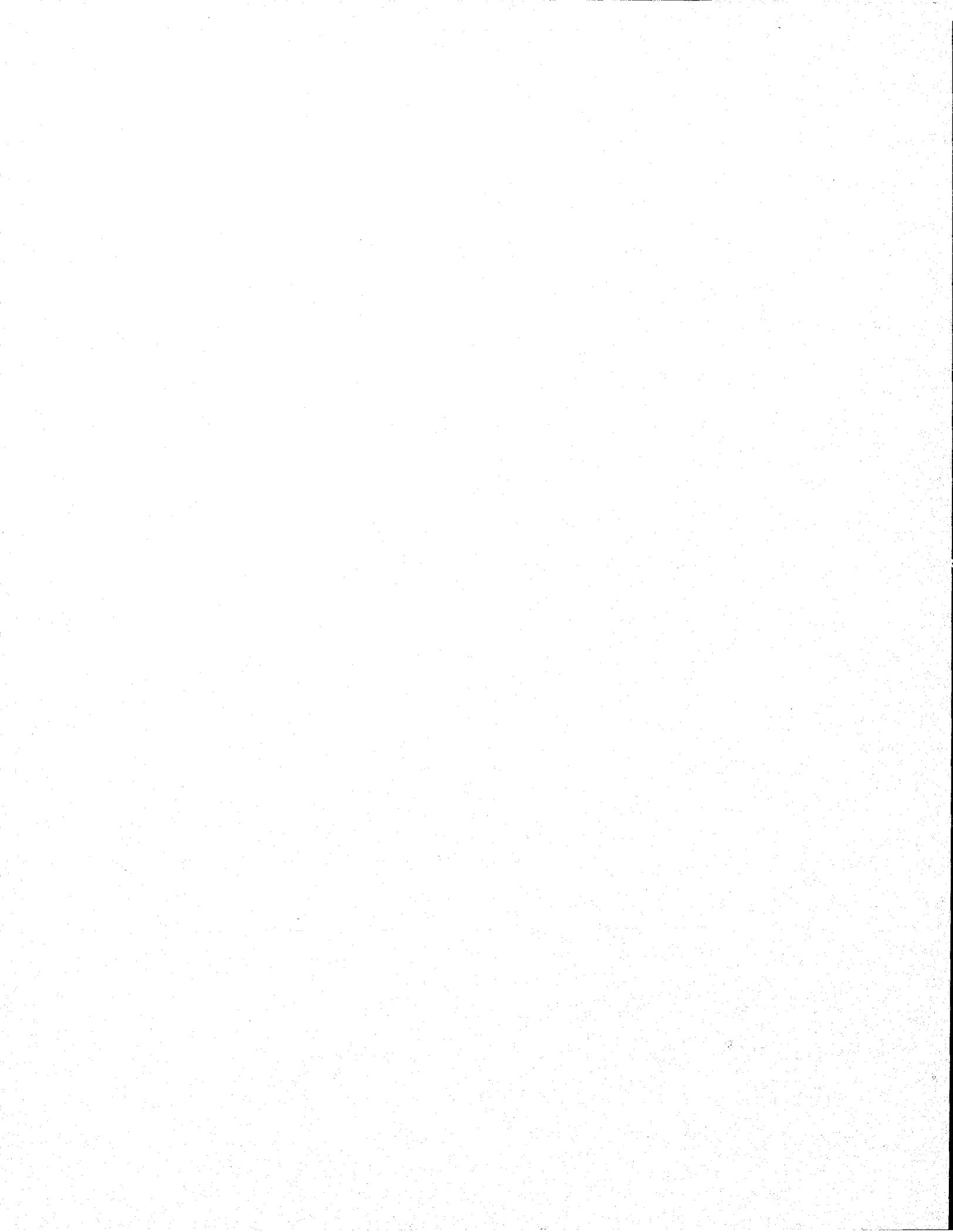
The War of the Eggs. 16mm color. Story of a young mother whose depression and anger leads her to lash out at her child. Includes a session with an understanding psychiatrist who brings the couple face to face with their problems. 26 minutes. (Paulist Productions)

Don't Give Up on Me . . . 16mm color. Semi-documentary study of a child abuse case, with caseworkers, therapists, and abusive parents and their children playing themselves. Features a Parents Anonymous session and a staff meeting; also supportive services for families in trouble—day care, homemaker service, and a court hearing in which an abusive mother receives counseling. 28 minutes. (Cavalcade Productions for the Metropolitan Area Protective Services Project, a federally funded pilot study by DCFS and private agencies in Cook County)

For more information on these and other resources, write to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, One North Old State Capitol Plaza, Springfield, Illinois 62706.

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This booklet was originally prepared by Vicki Van Dyke, formerly of the DCFS Peoria Area child abuse unit.



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