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Building A Community Response to Child Abuse and Maltreatment

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Child abuse is a hurt to all communities. Children from all racial, religious, social and economic groups are its victims. Abuse and maltreatment are symptoms of a society in trouble—a society in which the individual is dehumanized and the family is disintegrating.

News stories daily remind us of the horrors of child abuse and maltreatment. Nationwide, public agencies receive over 300,000 reports of suspected child abuse or maltreatment every year, and each year 2,000 children die in circumstances in which abuse or maltreatment is suspected. But no one knows for sure how many more children suffer harsh and terrible childhoods without their plight being detected and reported to the authorities.

Everyone pays the price of a young child's suffering. From the most practical as well as the most humanitarian points of view, it is less expensive and more humane to protect and nurture these children within a rehabilitated family environment than it is to endure the social costs of their continued abuse and maltreatment.

Unless we take compassionate yet firm steps to improve their plight, we consign these children to a life of continuing deprivation and peril. And we consign our communities to a future of aggression, drug abuse and violence.

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Abused children often grow up to be socially destructive—to vent on others, particularly their children, the violence and aggression their parents visited upon them. As New York City Family Court Judge Nanette Dembitz rightly said: "The root of crime in the streets is neglect of children."

As a society, we have provided a combination of laws and procedures through which professionals and private citizens who come in contact with endangered children can, and in some situations *must*, take protective action. Laws have established reporting procedures, authorized the taking of children into protective custody and assigned child protective responsibilities to social agencies and the police. Laws have also created juvenile and criminal court jurisdictions and fostered treatment programs—all to protect vulnerable children and families.

But in almost every community in the nation, there are inadequacies, breakdowns and gaps in the child protective process. Detection and reporting are haphazard and incomplete; protective investigations are often poorly performed; and suitable treatment programs exist more in grant applications than in practice.

For far too many endangered children, the existing child protection system is inadequate to the life-saving tasks assigned it. Too many children and families are processed through the system with a paper promise of help. For example, as many as three-quarters of those children who die in circumstances in which abuse or maltreatment is suspected were known to the authorities before their deaths.

More fundamentally, prevention is an

easily touted though little understood and unevenly pursued goal. Existing child protective procedures treat child abuse and maltreatment only after the fact, not on a primary preventive level. As was pointed out ten years ago, "Preventing neglect and battering depends in the long run on preventing transmission of the kind of social deprivation which takes children's lives, damages their physical health, and retards their minds, and which contributes through those who survive to a rising population of next generation parents who will not be able to nurture children."¹

The challenge we face is not so much to discover what works; to a great extent we know what works. We must now discover how to develop the cooperative community structures necessary to provide needed services efficiently, effectively and compassionately.

According to conventional wisdom, the failure of our child protective institutions is caused by a dreadful lack of facilities, protective workers, social workers, judges, shelters and probation workers, and of all sorts of rehabilitative, social and psychiatric services. Undoubtedly, if we poured more millions of dollars into existing programs, the picture would be less bleak. But existing facilities and services, if properly utilized, could go a long way toward fulfilling the need to protect children.

Rehabilitative services are delivered by a social service system that is fragmented, overlapping and uncoordinated. If such diversity and competition created better services for children and their families, the lack of focus and unity in the system would not be of

great concern. But the result of such fragmentation has been blurred responsibility, diluted resources and uncoordinated planning, all of which severely limit the effectiveness of the overall approach. Local child protective agencies, police, juvenile courts, hospitals and a variety of other public and private agencies share, divide and duplicate scarce resources. The waste in manpower, expertise, record keeping, administration and policy planning caused by the existing fragmentation of services was never justified. It cannot now be tolerated in this period of severe budgetary constraint.

The patchwork complex of agencies and laws with divergent philosophies and procedures that makes up the average community's child protection system has been widely criticized.² Responsibility is frequently passed from one agency or individual to another. Anywhere from three to eight agencies can be involved in a particular case. This means that three to eight separate individuals must become acquainted with the case, three to eight separate sets of forms must be filled out, three to eight separate filing systems are maintained with possibly inconsistent information recorded and three to eight referrals are made—all offering the possibility of administrative or bureaucratic fumbling.

The result is a system that limits the involvement of individuals and makes them powerless. As Dr. Ray Helfer has complained, often no one person is responsible and no one person is accountable. Additional consequences of fragmentation are frequent losses of information—situations in which one agency has critical information concerning a child's care or condition which is not

communicated to the "appropriate" agency. Compounding this fragmentation and lack of involvement is a general absence of follow-up of referrals among agencies. One can well appreciate the frightful reality of endangered children "falling between the cracks."

While present efforts to prevent and treat child abuse and maltreatment are of limited effectiveness, the potential for helping families meet their child care responsibilities is great.

Children can be protected and their well-being fostered by helping parents to "parent." There are programs in all parts of the nation helping parents cope with the stresses of family life in our modern society. Social casework, psychological and psychiatric services, child abuse teams, lay therapists, parent surrogates, day care, Parents Anonymous groups, homemaker services, education for parenthood, and a whole range of other concrete services and programs can and do make a difference in the level of family functioning.³ Unfortunately, these successful programs often are not seen as part of the child protection process in most communities. Either they are not available to protective services or they are not used. To fail to involve these family building programs in the protective process is to ignore an approach that can and does make an improvement in the level of family functioning.

Treatment is a community process. Without the use or, when necessary, the development of diverse, indigenous and, therefore, responsive programs, we consign the child protective process to the abusive removal of children from

their homes, the overuse of foster care and the futility of treatment during brief bimonthly home visits.

Prevention, too, is a community process. It is necessary to incorporate into our individual, family and community life a greater understanding of family hygiene. A renewed sense of respect for the human growth of all individuals within the context of the family would do more to lower violence and aggression against the young than any number of social agencies which can become involved only after the process of family breakdown has progressed almost past the point of irremediable damage.

Public Support

Though the efforts of concerned professionals are indispensable to the coordination and improvement of services, the key to real progress is an informed and aware citizenry. Child abuse and maltreatment are not new problems but, traditionally, the moving force for the development of treatment and preventive programs has existed largely in the professional community. Broad based public support—crucial for the funding of programs and the breaking of bureaucratic logjams—has been missing. Although sympathetic citizens have been enraged and shocked by the inherent sensationalism of individual child abuse and maltreatment cases, until very recently overall public awareness, understanding and support have been sporadic and unfocused.

When exposed to an abused child, the first reactions of most people are utter disbelief, denial and avoidance. Finding the cruel and tragic condition of the child beyond their capacity to under-

stand, they deny that the injury was deliberately inflicted or that a parent could be responsible. They deny the horror of a child's home environment and the probability that the child and his siblings had been battered previously. Even more painfully, people meeting such children evade their own responsibility, explaining "I don't want to get involved"; "It's not my job"; "I don't want to come between the child and his parents"; or "Don't ask me to report a parent to the authorities—that would be interfering with the privacy and rights of the family."

Because of the tremendous publicity generated by numerous sensational cases in communities across the nation, we are reaching a time when the public can no longer refuse to see the evidence for what it is—that children do suffer almost unbelievable harm at the hands of their parents.

Now, there is a danger that denial will turn to outrage and overreaction. Upon confronting child abuse, citizens as well as some professionals sometimes act as if they have discovered absolute evil.

The reality of child abuse is so awful that a harsh, condemnatory response is understandable. But such reactions must be tempered if any progress is to be made. If we permit feelings of rage towards the abusers of children to blind us to the needs of the parents as well as of the children, these suffering and unfortunate families will be repelled and not helped. Only with the application of objective and enlightened policies can treatment, research, prevention and education be successfully performed.

Hitherto, the publicity attached to spectacular cases has served to educate the public and professions to the existence and nature of the problem. Henceforth, the burden will be on concerned members of society to devise procedures for the protection of these unfortunate youngsters through the rehabilitation and strengthening of their families. There must now be a reversal in the attitude of the public toward parents who have been seen as cruel perpetrators. In the words of Dr. Vincent J. Fontana, "We must come to realize that there are two victims of child abuse—the child and the parent."

Mounting public awareness now needs to be sharpened and developed into a constructive, effective force for

far-reaching reform. An intensive national public service campaign on child abuse and maltreatment can meet prejudices, emotionalism and misunderstanding head on. Sympathy for abused and maltreated children must be channeled into constructive help in their behalf.

All citizens must recognize the critical need to strengthen the family so that it can better cope with periods of stress. The public must come to understand that in certain circumstances almost any family can have difficulty coping and that, at such times, the family members must be able to seek and find help. Only if this level of understanding is reached can public concern be channeled into true community action.

Child abuse laws provide only the legal and institutional framework for action. A law lives in the way it is used. Child abuse and child maltreatment are family and community problems. If we are to prevent and treat them, we must have a community commitment to fostering the emotional and behavioral hygiene of the individual, the family and the community.

Child abuse must be understood as a function of uncontrolled or uncontrollable personal, familial and social stress. Despite popular misconceptions, most abusing parents are not sadists, criminals or mentally retarded persons. Abusing parents are capable of loving the children they harm and they often experience great guilt and remorse about their abusive behavior. In many ways, they are like all parents. But when they experience moments of anger and frustration, they are likely to take it out on their children. Sometimes they confuse discipline with the expression of their own inner fury.

All parents and parents-to-be can benefit from family-life education and a knowledge of child development. Parenting is not instinctive, and experts have learned a great deal about child-rearing that needs to be communicated to parents. As a first step, parents must be taught that when they are under stress their children can be in danger.

The abusing or imminently abusing parent must be reached. Parents who have problems in rearing their children are acutely sensitive to being labeled sick, sadistic or degenerate. They also fear punishment and jail. If these par-

ents sense this attitude in treatment programs, they will pull away, further endangering their children, or forcing a protective agency to remove a child from his home. A truly rehabilitatively oriented social system must create an understanding atmosphere, even though further abuse or maltreatment cannot be condoned.

Often these parents are the most difficult to reach, for they are usually isolated people, fearful of the possible community response to their behavior. But they must be reached and told that help is available—help that can enable them to better meet their parenting responsibilities, keep the family together and protect the child within the family home. Parents need to be told where they can seek help, including help from family service agencies, child protective agencies, self-help groups, doctors, visiting nurses, day care programs, clergy, neighbors, friends and family. They need to be assured that someone cares, that someone is willing to help them when they need help. But if we expect troubled families to come forth, the help offered them must be real.

Prevention and treatment are a community responsibility. We know that there are many current programs which have demonstrated that they can successfully help parents care for their children and maintain family life. Every community must take inventory to see whether it has the basic ingredients for a comprehensive, indigenous and responsive program to meet local needs for the prevention and treatment of child abuse and maltreatment and to aid parents in stress.

Over 100 years ago, Emerson wrote: "If a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon, make a better mousetrap . . . the world will make a beaten path to his door." So too, if we build community resources that better help families function, families in need will beat a path to their doors. ■

¹ Morris, Marian G., Gould, Robert W., and Matthews, Patricia J., "Toward Prevention of Child Abuse," CHILDREN, Mar.-Apr. 1964.

² See, e.g., DeFrancis, Vincent, *Child Protective Services: A National Survey* (1967) and New York State Assembly Select Committee on Child Abuse, *Report* (April 1972).

³ See the special series of articles on child abuse and neglect in the May-June 1975 issue of CHILDREN TODAY.

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