

There are many faces to the monster of child abuse

Part I of a two-part series examining the tragedy of child abuse

By Hadley Coulton

Mental Health and You is provided as a service of the North of Superior Programs.

Maltreatment and the neglect of children are part of child abuse. Child abuse is an age-old problem. However, it has been only very recently that society has become concerned with this problem.

In order to control child abuse, the provincial government has set up 51 provincial children's aid societies. Their purpose is to monitor child abuse and to provide education to the community.

There are various types of child abuse that children fall victim to each year. One type is 'child neglect,' which means actively hurting or failing to take the proper care of a child. It also includes depriving the child of acceptance or affection.

Parents who are abusive in this manner may humiliate the child, deny him/her love, or may even physically abuse the child. Abuse may range from shaking the child to sexually assaulting the victim.

Emotional abuse is the second type of maltreatment inflicted upon children. This involves withholding

warmth and affection such as cuddling, or talking to the infant or child.

Withholding love can slow the physical, intellectual and emotional development of the growing child. Some abusive parents resort to humiliating the child by name calling. The child who constantly hears him/herself being called "stupid" will soon grow to believe this. This too is emotional abuse.

The third, and sometimes most devastating form of child abuse, is sexual abuse. Contrary to popular belief, sexual abuse is most often committed by parents, relatives, or friends as opposed to strangers.

It is quite frustrating to admit it, but incest occurs more often than we are willing to acknowledge. Furthermore, the potential for long-standing psychological damage is enormous.

While small children, or even infants, can be the victims of sexual

abuse, it is more typically experienced by girls who are around the age of puberty.

Quite often abuse may be in the form of incest; often the offender is the father or stepfather.

The mother may be aware of the abuse, but may not make any effort to discourage this type of activity. The father or spouse of the mother may engage in sexual acts with more than one daughter over the course of years.

Cases estimated in thousands

The latest statistics obtainable concerning child abuse are from 1982. In that year, children's aid societies across Ontario reported 700 verified cases of child abuse to the Ontario Child Abuse Register.

Many more cases go unreported, and it's estimated that 2,000-3,000 cases of child abuse may have occurred in 1982.

Most persons believe that child

abuse only happens in economically disadvantaged or educationally limited families, or even in families with mental health problems such as drugs or alcohol.

The truth is that child abuse happens in all walks of life and across all economic and social classes.

Also, 75 per cent of abusers are parents or legal guardians of the victimized children. The rest represent relatives or friends.

The next article will examine the causes of child abuse and how to recognize it.

If you would like to comment on this article or any of the other articles that have appeared, feel free to write to the News office, P.O. Box 579, Terrace Bay, Ontario, POT 2W0.

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