Child abuse and neglect: Support and preventative programs for parents

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Abstract
Incidence of child abuse in this country is staggering. The United States Children's Bureau found that at least one million children are mistreated each year. Over three thousand of these children are killed by their parents or another caretaker. Studies show the abuser is not usually a raving maniac, but a "normal" individual who is overpowered by his or her personal, emotional, and environmental problems (Whitfield, 1987). To give support and aid to this group of parents is an aim of child abuse and neglect prevention programs.

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Incidence of child abuse in this country is staggering. The United States Children's Bureau found that at least one million children are mistreated each year. Over three thousand of these children are killed by their parents or another caretaker. Studies show the abuser is not usually a raving maniac, but a "normal" individual who is overpowered by his or her personal, emotional, and environmental problems (Whitfield, 1987). To give support and aid to this group of parents is an aim of child abuse and neglect prevention programs. Through studies, a number of authors have established three basic models for prevention measures (Ballew, 1985; Barth, 1983; Kempe, 1972; McMurty, 1985). These include:

1. Legislation to protect children's rights, abandonment of corporal punishment, advocacy for abortion redistributive economic policy, and a wide range of social reforms.

2. Focus on intrafamilial variables that seem to be connected to abuse and neglect. Social programs are developed to assist families with the problems they encounter.
3. The use of intensive educational interventions. These are geared toward a variety of audiences in all facets of society.

It is difficult to pinpoint a universal definition for child abuse/neglect. Each state in the United States maintains its own definition. Most definitions however, do include several common elements.

The first of these elements is physical abuse which involves a nonaccidental injury. Second is sexual molestation. This is the exploitation of a child for sexual gratification of an adult. The failure to provide for the basic needs of a child is known as neglect. Finally, emotional abuse is included. This is indicated by parental behavior which places unreasonable demands on a child to perform above his or her capabilities (Andrews, 1984; Ballew, 1985; Broadhurst, 1986; Comstock, 1981; Kempe, 1972).

It is equally difficult to recognize specific causes for child abuse/neglect and to identify possible perpetrators of such acts. Recognizing and reporting suspected child abuse/neglect and working with the child and the family after a report has been made are necessary in combating and preventing the problem from recurring (Broadhurst, 1986; McMurty, 1985). The
The purpose of this paper is to explore prevention and support systems available for parents.

Prevention models can be further broken down into primary and secondary. The primary strategies are geared toward society at large, while the secondary measures focus only on parents who have been defined as "high risk" (Comstock, 1981; McMurty, 1985). Early intervention and professional teamwork are often sighted as the best ways to combat abuse and neglect.

One legislative strategy was the enactment in 1974 of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act. Funds are provided to the states from the federal government under Title XX of the Social Security Act. These funds are to be used to "develop, strengthen, and implement programs to protect children" (Irwin, 1980, p. 10).

This law also expanded the spectrum of mandatory reporters. Now, not only doctors, but nurses, certified school personnel, social workers, and others are obligated to report any incidence of abuse or neglect which they observe. The involvement of these professionals has helped to increase the variety of settings as well as the impact of prevention programs.

One hospital-based program focuses on the need of families to receive adequate services. Parents are able
to function much better when the stress of an unsatisfactory financial situation is relieved. Among the services provided are proper medical and dental treatment along with finding adequate housing. The parents are also given assistance when dealing with the police and public agencies they may encounter (Ballew, 1985; Barth, 1983; Irwin, 1980). This sort of socially reforming program gives abusive parents support, both emotionally and in a more tangible way.

The multidisciplinary model of child abuse and neglect prevention has become more popular. Professionals from all areas are unified to combat this problem. Human service organizations need to break down barriers of turf. There is a great need for all to know the credibility, abilities, and needs of others (Andrews, 1984; Ballew, 1985; Irwin, 1980). **Alliance**, a division of Catholic Charities, is one such multidisciplinary program (Andrews, 1984; Irwin, 1980). The goal of **Alliance** is to educate the entire service community about a formal and specific approach to the prevention and treatment of child abuse. Through a coordinated effort, all social workers are joined as a team in the detection, diagnosis, and treatment of abusers, or those found at risk.
Social programs geared at helping intrafamilial problems are numerous. Included here are home visitors, crisis lines, day care, foster grandparents, and others.

These programs lend emotional as well as practical aid and support to parents. They are also helpful with teaching daily living and coping skills. By using the services of professionals, para-professionals, volunteers, and natural helpers, the programs give the parents proper role models and a facilitative relationship. The proper role of a helper is vital to these programs. The helpers need to build trust, utilize proper communication, be readily available to the parents, have a nonjudgemental attitude, and be aware of individual differences (Comstock, 1981; Fairworth, 1982; Whitfield, 1987).

Visiting nurses is one professional outreach program. A public health nurse goes into the home of an abuser or a family at risk and lends aid where needed. The nurse gives education on medical needs, nutrition and child development, as well as being a friend for the parents. Homemaker services are similar to the visiting nurse. The home aide gives friendship along with lending practical help in caring for children, cooking, and cleaning the home (Ballew, 1985; Kempe, 1972).
Crisis nurseries are set up to provide relief for parents when they are unable to control themselves with their children. They are a safe place for parents to bring their children in times of stress. Often this "time-out" from a child is the remedy the parent needs. People are better able to cope when a support system is available at the peak crisis time.

Volunteers like Foster Grandparents and Parent Aides are a vital part of the helping team. Foster Grandparents work in the hospital with abused or neglected children and their parents. They cuddle and comfort the child, while lending a therapeutic ear to the parents. The most important function of the parent aide is to be an available friend to the family through phone calls and visits.

Recently, professionals have noted that Natural Helpers can play a viable role in the prevention of child abuse. Because of the reduced funds and higher case loads, many professionals have looked to the possibility of using friends, relatives, and other family members as part of the preventative team (Ballew, 1985). This type of helper has good and bad aspects. The Natural Helper may be more spontaneous and empathetic because of his or her previous relationship
with the parents. Natural Helpers offer encouragement and nonjudgemental support, along with concrete forms of help like babysitting, transportation, and gifts or loans. This form of assistance is important also because it eases the overwhelming feeling of isolation many parents with problems feel. A social worker, or other agency person, holding the role of mediator or a coordinator, can include the Natural Helper as a part of the service team. Some problems with dual roles and relationships do exist for the Natural Helpers. They may be too close and unable to be totally objective. One of the most positive aspects of these people is their continuing relationship with the parents and family after the agency service is terminated (Andrews, 1984; Ballew, 1985; Comstock, 1981).

Self-help groups are also an intricate part of the preventive services. Groups like Parents or Mothers Anonymous offer abusers the opportunity to talk with others who have had similar experiences. These groups are usually led by a former abuser and members are allowed to share their feelings and thoughts. Also, the assurance of anonymity affords the parents involved the opportunity to express their feelings and discuss their actions without fear of public exposure (Collins, 1978).
Parents Anonymous follows a philosophy of unconditional positive regard, support, and guidance.

Education and public awareness seem to be the predominate service in prevention today. Through the use of media endorsements, community facilities and experts in various fields, several communities have set up effective programs. These human service activities geared toward prevention of distress and promotion of well-being, are ultimately humane. Individuals, families, and the community at large benefit. Public education messages promise a more efficient use of limited resources (Brawley, 1983; Collins, 1978).

Self-control training for maltreating parents is a good example of an educational program. Parents are trained to use I statements and self-calming techniques when dealing with a stressful situation. Alternative actions like calling a friend or reading a magazine are suggested for times when the parent feels pressured or upset. Constructive communication with their children is emphasized. Some group role playing is used to facilitate learning (Barth, 1983).

A rural Kentucky community, plagued with increased abuse reports, pooled its resources to form some effective educational programs (Andrews, 1984). An
An educational seminar was set up to instruct the entire community on causes, prevention and treatment of abuse and neglect. Many civic leaders were involved and community facilities were utilized. A summer seminar for children was conducted in the town library. It instructed the children about what constituted abuse, what protection under the law they have, and steps they are able to take to protect themselves (Andrews, 1984).

Involving people in a curriculum which teaches them to cope with the changing and complicated demands of our society seems to be the most viable method of prevention. Studies indicate that our high rate of mobility and lack of support and knowledge are prominent factors in cases of abuse and neglect. Programs have been developed to educate parents and future parents about the most effective forms of discipline, child and human development, family living, consumer rights and other life coping skills (Andrews, 1984; Fairworth, 1982).

Exploring Childhood, a comprehensive course used by thousands of schools addresses the topics of child development, family and society. Another course, Exploring Parenting, strives to build on participants' existing child rearing skills. It stresses discussion.
of different parenting styles and techniques. Both of these courses are developed by the United States Department of Health and Human Services (Broadhurst, 1986).

Adult Education divisions of schools can reach out to parents with programs like **Parent Effectiveness Training** by Thomas Gordon, Ph.D. and **Systematic Training for Effective Parenting**, based on the work of Rudolph Dreikurs, Ph.D. Both of these programs stress communication and coping skills (Broadhurst, 1986). Several schools are also getting involved with prevention through their Parent-Teacher Associations. Regular meetings are often devoted to discussions of child abuse and specific problems parents may encounter with their children. Guest speakers from different human service fields are featured (Fairworth, 1982). Educational institutions have an important role to play in preparing and sustaining parents now and in the next generation. Through them, caring and knowledgeable people are guided to care for children in the wider community (Whitfield, 1987).

For the adults, a program called **Building Blocks** was established. These groups focused on stress management, child care, and developmental education.
Three progressive steps are involved. **Building Blocks One** is for infants, **Building Blocks Two** is for preschoolers, and the final group **Building Blocks Three** deals with school age children (Andrews, 1984). All the educational services reported a high success rate, and from them parents developed informal support groups.

The researcher wanted to find out more about what is available in this community. The researcher called E. Johnston (personal communication, July 26, 1989) at the Waterloo YWCA. Ms. Johnston talked about the **Young Mothers'** support group which deals with the main problems of young parents. This is a self-help and support group with some education involved.

P. Hayes (personal communication, July 26, 1989) from Black Hawk County Family Service League talked about the switch in the community from **Parents Anonymous** to a more formal and educational program called **Parents' Education/Parents' Support**. The switch was made because of local need. Ms. Hayes indicated the **Parents Anonymous** lost its effective leader and was not meeting the needs of the group. **Parents' Education/Parents' Support** runs on a different philosophy than **Parents Anonymous**. More guided instruction is used in the **Parents' Education/Parents' Support** group. **Parents'**
Education/Parents' Support seems very successful. On a rating scale of ten items, most of the members moved up at least three points. Parents' Connection, matching an abusive parent with a trained volunteer helper, is another community program. These volunteers come from all walks of life and educational backgrounds. Another group also known as Parents' Connection, deals with victims, abusers and spouses in incest situations. The educationally oriented group is led by professional volunteers. Each group meets separately now, but Ms. Hayes sees them as meeting together in the future.

Community involvement and professional teamwork seem to be vital factors in the preventive and support measures. Much of the literature the researcher reviewed encouraged the idea of more education in recognizing and reporting child abuse and neglect. Professionals need to be knowledgeable about what is available in the prevention area and how people in need can be connected with these services.
REFERENCES


