

Child Abuse and Neglect: Breaking the Silence

[Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service 1993]

by Helen Navarre

Suppose you are walking through the park on a pleasant summer day. Suddenly, you hear a child's scream and you turn to see an ominous looking character viciously striking a little girl. It is likely that you would immediately call out for help and do whatever you could to rescue the child.

Few incidents of child abuse are this dramatic. There may be children in your neighborhood, and even in your congregation or Christian day school, who are in as much danger as the little girl in the park. Most abusers are not predatory strangers, but close relatives, friends, or trusted neighbors. They may be very skillful at covering up their actions and lead outwardly normal lives. The children may be too afraid or too young to reveal what is happening. In such instances, there is no scream for help. There is only silence.

You may, nevertheless, pick up some clues that something is not right with a child. Perhaps she comes to school hungry, disheveled in dress, or he has frequent unexplained accidents. It is often hard to determine when it is appropriate to step in and notify outside authorities. We don't like to think that abuse and neglect can happen in Christian families. What if we are mistaken about what is going on? Do we risk sinning against the Eighth Commandment by making accusations that might later turn out to be unfounded? What about confidentiality? What are we required to do under the law if we suspect that a child is being mistreated? With growing public awareness of the problem of abuse and neglect and the enactment of stringent laws in recent years, pastors, teachers, and youth workers are facing such questions with increasing frequency. This article offers a brief overview of the problem of child abuse and neglect as it affects all of us. It will also look at legal requirements for the reporting of suspected child abuse and neglect, and follow up with suggestions for helping victims and their families.

How Do We Define Child Abuse and Neglect?

As sinful human beings, we will never be perfect parents. All of us have made mistakes in our relationships with children. We lose our temper and use poor judgment at times. We also understand that others do the same. Children are remarkably resilient and generally survive our mistakes, just as we survive the imperfections of our own parents and teachers. This is certainly not what is meant when we refer to child abuse or neglect.

Abuse should not be confused in any way with appropriate disciplinary measures. God holds parents responsible for guiding and correcting their children. As Hebrews 12:11 tells us, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." Proper discipline is administered with loving concern for the welfare of the child. Punishment becomes harmful when it has no clear relationship to the child's behavior, when its aim is to hurt and humiliate rather than teach, and when it is used to meet the need of the adult just to release anger rather than to help the child learn right from wrong. Abuse and neglect occur when children are subjected to physical injury, sexual exploitation, emotional damage, or do not receive adequate care.

Children have been abused and neglected throughout the history of this sinful world. Recognition of child abuse as a major social problem in our country has been relatively recent, however. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, for example, which provides federal assistance to the states for prevention, identification, and treatment services, was passed in 1974,

less than twenty years ago. With over three million reported cases in the U.S. last year and more than 1300 deaths, we appear to be experiencing a growing epidemic in our country. Some of the increase in numbers over the past years can be attributed to better reporting methods, as the problem is certainly not a new one. The totals are shocking, however, especially when we consider that many cases are left uncovered. We may never know how many more people are actually affected.

What we do know is that child abuse and neglect can have devastating effects. According to the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse, "The tragedy of abuse grows, robbing the victim of a healthy childhood and often a healthy adult life." Many studies have shown that a disproportionate number of victims of abuse eventually become abusers themselves, thus extending the damage into the next generation. Ignoring or covering up the problem, as was often done in the past, only makes matters worse. Early intervention, on the other hand, not only serves to rescue the child from further harm, but also provides an opportunity to help the abuser to change. For these reasons, we now have laws requiring many people who work with children, including parochial school teachers and counselors, to report suspected child abuse or neglect. Pastors are not generally mandated to report, but many wisely choose to do so when they believe that a child is in danger. (State laws may vary from state to state and be subject to amendment.)

In my work as a family and individual therapist at Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service I see many people who are struggling with depression, marital difficulties, alcoholism, anxiety, and other serious problems. A disturbing number of these people were physically or sexually abused as children. One young woman told me that she had been afraid to tell anyone about her father's sexual advances toward her because she thought that no one would believe her. No one suspected, not even her mother, that a man who was so active in church affairs could do such a thing. When she finally mustered the courage to confide in a teacher, she was advised to forget it and get on with her life, as her father was no longer bothering her. Several years later, she was horrified to discover that he had subsequently molested her younger sister, and she now lives with regret that she did not do more to stop him. Like many victims of abuse, she finds it difficult to trust anyone. Consequently, the concept of a loving heavenly father has been hard for her to understand. With the Lord's help, however, she is beginning to make peace with her past and to find hope for the future.

This woman's story is not an isolated one. There are no easy solutions to the problems of child abuse and neglect, but we can help by being aware of the danger, reaching out to those who are vulnerable, and urging abusers and potential abusers to face up to the situation and get the help they need. We can break the silence.

Legal Requirements for Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect

The news story was a familiar one. A faulty space heater overheated and ignited some nearby curtains while the owner slept soundly in another room. An alert neighbor smelled smoke and called the fire department. This timely intervention prevented further damage to the home and possibly saved lives. The person who reported the fire didn't consider himself a hero, but was just trying to be a good neighbor. Failing to call for help in such a potentially dangerous situation would have been unthinkable to him.

Keeping silent when child abuse or neglect are suspected could have consequences more serious than ignoring a raging fire. Alerting those who can offer help to victims and their families is vital. Relatives, friends or the children themselves may be too afraid or embarrassed

to come forward, or they may not know where to go for assistance. In many instances, professionals, such as teachers, school nurses, counselors, pastors and others who work with children on a regular basis are in the best position to observe signs that children may be in trouble. They can protect the child from further damage and/or refer them and their families for help.

Some clues that children are being abused are: frequent bruises, burns, or other injuries which are inadequately explained; habitual hunger; frequent unexplained absences from school; inappropriate clothing; excessive seeking of affection; cringing or withdrawal from adults; difficulty in walking or sitting; overt sexual behavior; listlessness; falling asleep in class; marked changes in personality or behavior; a negative attitude toward the child by the parent. This is not a comprehensive list, and you may see other things which concern you. It is important to remember that such symptoms could also be indicators of other problems, such as illness or emotional disturbance, but, in any case, they are signals that something may be wrong.

Laws in almost every state recognize the importance of members of the helping professions in detecting dangerous situations by *requiring* them to report child abuse and neglect to the proper authorities. While individual statutes differ in some respects, all fifty states and the District of Columbia require the reporting of nonaccidental injury and neglect of children. Our Christian day school teachers and administrators are included in this mandate. As stated earlier, while pastors are generally not legally obligated to report, they are certainly urged to do so also. Some may hesitate, for fear that it may lead to entanglement in a frustrating bureaucracy, exposure to unChristian counseling, and, perhaps, the breakup of the family. Others may hesitate because of their concern for breaking confidentiality. In child abuse cases, however, each pastor needs to seriously consider the consequences of maintaining confidentiality. In fact, in such cases, reporting may well provide greater emotional and spiritual benefit both for the abused and the abuser. No one can say that the system is perfect. However, it is possible to work within it. For example, counselors at our own Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service are qualified to provide court-ordered counseling when asked to do so. Advice and support services for pastors and school personnel are also available through the agency. It is important to remember that it is not the intent of the law to remove the child from the home or to punish the parents, but to protect the child and preserve the family. The sooner they receive help, the more likely it is that they will be able to stay together and work out their problems.

Because each state has its own regulations which are subject to periodic revision, it is advisable to consult authorities in your area for specific information on your responsibilities under the law. Your state department of public instruction may be a helpful resource. Basic requirements are fairly consistent among the various states, however, the law in my own state of Wisconsin is a typical example of child abuse legislation, and may serve as a useful illustration of commonly accepted legal provisions.

Under Wisconsin law, the term "child abuse" applies to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Physical abuse is defined as "physical injury inflicted on a child by other than accidental means." This includes, but is not limited to, lacerations, fractured bones, burns, severe bruising, and internal injuries. Sexual abuse includes sexual contact, intercourse, exploitation, and forced viewing of sexual activity. Emotional abuse is considered to be "harm to a child's psychological or intellectual functioning which is exhibited by severe anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or outward aggressive behavior, or a combination of these behaviors, which is caused by the child's parent, guardian, legal custodian, or other person exercising temporary control over the child, and for which the child's parent, or legal custodian has failed to obtain the treatment necessary to

remedy the harm.” Neglect is defined as failure to provide “necessary care, food, clothing, medical or dental care, or shelter so as to seriously endanger the physical health of the child.”

Teachers and others mandated to report are not expected to provide proof or conduct their own investigation. Wisconsin law requires only that there is *reasonable cause to suspect* that a child seen in the course of professional duties has been abused or neglected, or may be in danger of abuse or neglect. Reports should be made as quickly as possible to the child protection unit of the department of social services or to the local law enforcement agency. Consulting with someone else within the school for guidance and assistance is permissible, but it does not excuse the teacher from following up to make sure that the report is made. It is then the responsibility of the social services department to investigate and decide what action, if any, is needed and appropriate to protect the child. Anyone making a report in good faith is granted immunity from civil or criminal liability under the law. A mandated reporter who intentionally fails to report suspected child abuse or neglect, however, is subject to a fine, imprisonment, or both.

The first step in making a report is to call the department of social services in your area. State that you wish to make a report of suspected child abuse or neglect, and ask to speak to a child protective services worker. If you cannot reach the child protection agency, or if you believe the child is in immediate danger, call the local police or sheriff’s department. You will be asked for your name, position, and relationship to the child, as well as the child’s name, address, age and information about other members of the family. You will also be asked to give a description of the circumstances leading you to suspect abuse or neglect.

When a report is made and the protective services agency determines that the referral information warrants an investigation, the child protection worker will observe the child and may ask to interview the child privately at school. The worker may also interview the parents and other children in the family, and visit the family home. All information gathered in the investigation, including the name of the reporter, is confidential and may not be disclosed to anyone, except as provided by the law. When the investigation is concluded, the agency must inform the person who made the report what action, if any, was taken to protect the child.

In most cases, the child is not in immediate danger and can remain in the home while support services and counseling are provided. Removal from the home is done only when absolutely necessary to protect the child, and plans are then made to reunite the family as soon as it is safe to do so. If the abuser (parent, stepparent, other relative or boarder) resides with the child, the abuser may be removed and have a restraining order forbidding contact with the child.

In some states, not only members of the helping professions, but any person who has knowledge of abuse or neglect must report. Threatened as well as actual abuse or neglect must be reported in some instances. There is usually a criminal or civil penalty for failing to report and in all states, those who report are provided with immunity from liability.

It is never pleasant or easy to make a report of this kind, but keeping silent will not make the problem go away. Speaking out responsibly not only meets the requirements of the civil law, but is also a way to reach out to troubled families in Christian love and concern.

Responding to the Call for Help

Tears rolled down the cheeks of the young woman sitting in my office as her story unfolded. After ten years of silence, she finally gathered up her courage to talk about the sexual abuse she had suffered as a child. Fear and shame had kept her from telling anyone before, but she had come to a point where she could hold it in no longer. Earlier that day, I had counseled with a young boy who had recently been removed from the custody of his drug-addicted mother.

He had been left alone, scared and hungry, on numerous occasions, and had almost forgotten what childhood was all about. Another client related that he was having trouble controlling his temper, and was afraid of taking out his anger on his children, as his own father had done to him. These people represent only a few of the many members of our WELS congregations who struggle daily to overcome the damaging effects of child abuse and neglect. You may know some of them yourself. For many others, the silence has not yet been broken.

In addition to recognizing and reporting child abuse and neglect, there is much more that we can do, on an individual and congregational basis, to address this problem. St. Paul wrote, “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” (Galatians 5:21) As fellow members of this household of faith, we have an opportunity to do what secular social agencies are unable or unwilling to do. Motivated by Christian love, we can offer understanding, encouragement, direction and peace based on God’s word.

Christians can play an especially effective role in the areas of prevention and early intervention. County social service departments, often limited by shortages of funds and personnel, tend to concentrate on responding to crises. The system has been likened to building a hospital at the foot of a cliff to treat those who fall over the edge, rather than installing a guard rail at the top. According to Sally Kasper, a member of the Wisconsin Committee for Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse, most programs “don’t connect soon enough and don’t stay with the family long enough.” Pastors, teachers, youth workers, and other church members are often better able to detect potentially abusive situations when there is still time to do something to make a difference.

Some warning signals to watch for in abusive families include: high level of stress in a family, because of alcohol or other drug abuse, financial difficulties, emotional problems, marital conflict, or chronic physical illness; social isolation, with no friends or family to help out; immature parents who can’t understand their child’s needs and behavior; parents who were mistreated themselves as children and who had no positive role models for family relationships. The presence of these risk factors does not mean that abuse and neglect are bound to occur, of course, but by recognizing the dangers, we can be better prepared to offer help and guidance when needed.

There are many ways in which we can contribute to the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Bible classes, special courses, and outside speakers can provide opportunities for educating parents. A group for young mothers can be an excellent source of fellowship and mutual support. Teenagers and retired people can provide valuable respite to stressed-out parents by volunteering to help with chores or babysitting. Experienced parents might befriend those who are still “learning the ropes,” serving as mentors and Christian examples. Young adults and married couples can serve as “big brothers” and “big sisters” to children from single-parent homes. Sometimes, just a listening ear can make all the difference.

For those who have already experienced abuse, recently or in the past, much can be done also. It may take a long time for victims to work through feelings of fear, anger, and betrayal, but understanding and compassion from fellow Christians will help to heal the wounds. Many people who lived under horrible conditions as children can recall someone—a teacher, a pastor, a neighbor—who gave them hope and strength by letting them know that they were precious in the sight of God. Perhaps you can offer that kind of inspiration to someone, too.

When specialized counseling is needed, as is most often the case, referral to experienced Christian therapists can speed the road to recovery. It is important to remember that families and

individuals under court order to undergo counseling often have the option of choosing a qualified church-related agency to provide the required treatment services.

All of us can have a part in confronting the evil of child abuse and neglect, a problem which has so often been ignored or covered up in the past. With God's help, we can, indeed, break the silence.

References

- Ator, Leslie. "What Steps to Take if you Suspect Child Abuse," *Pioneer Press*, Wilmette, Illinois (September 10, 1992), 24.
- Gronholz, Gene. "The Two Extremes of Discipline," Presented at the Central Pastor/Teacher Conference, St. Mark's Ev. Lutheran Church, Watertown, Wisconsin: May 11, 1992
- Kadushin, Alfred, and Judith A. Martin. *Child Welfare Services*, Fourth Edition, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988
- Milwaukee County Department of Social Services. *Child Abuse and Neglect: How You Can Help*, Milwaukee
- Ohio Department of Public Welfare, Children's Protective Services. *Open the Door on Child Abuse and Neglect*, Columbus, Ohio: 1979
- Piper, Annie. "Churches Must Confront Sexual Abuse," *The Capital Times*, Madison, Wisconsin (November 28, 1992), 12A.
- Schneider, Pat. "Child Abuse Help Falls Short Here," *The Capital Times*, Madison, Wisconsin (September 21, 1992) 1A
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Human Development Services. *Child Sexual Abuse Prevention: Tips to Parents*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984
- Wisconsin Department of Health. and Social Service, Division of Community Services. *Public Concern and Personal Action: Child Sexual Abuse*, Madison, Wisconsin
- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Exceptional Education/Public Services. "School Employees Responsibility for Mandatory Reporting of Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect." *Information Update*, Madison, Wisconsin: May, 1992.