Child Abuse Symposium: Introductory Comments

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Most of the people who become involved in Parents Anonymous are not animals; they are not without guilt. They are feeling the worse possible guilt that one can imagine. They don't know how to deal with their feelings and they are asking for help.¹

During the summer of 1972, I received a news clipping which contained a large picture of the scarred and bruised back of a young boy. The headline under the picture was datelined "Anywhere U.S.A.,” and said, “What hath ‘man’ wrought.” The story began:

A child is brought into the emergency room of a hospital in a coma. The child appears to be suffering from a head injury with some bruises around the chest and arm areas . . . . The parent seems ill at ease, not for the child's condition, but for the fact that he will have to answer questions that may reveal some hidden secrets.

The story described the doctor’s examination of the child; his questioning of the parent; and ended with the then all-too-frequent conclusion:

X-rays establish the child has had numerous broken ribs, at various stages of healing, that at an earlier period the child had suffered from a broken leg. The parent is questioned about these facts that have now come to light, and he makes light of ‘kids hurting themselves all the time.’ Nothing further is done. The child is released from the hospital and returns to the same environment, as before, to await an uncertain fate.

Stories and reports such as this one in 1972 led me—as Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Children and Youth—to hold hearings into the whole subject of child abuse and neglect. My subcommittee visited child abuse treatment programs throughout the country. We heard testimony from a wide variety of experts, including former abusing parents, themselves. I had been a Senator for nine years at the time. I had

¹ Ms. Jolly K., former abusing parent and founder of Parents Anonymous, testifying before the Senate Subcommittee on Children and Youth.
served on almost every subcommittee concerned with human needs and major social problems. But nothing I witnessed during that period was as disturbing or horrifying, or as compelling, as the stories and photos of children, many of them infants, who had been whipped and beaten with razor straps; burned and mutilated by cigarettes and lighters; scalded by boiling water; bruised and battered by physical assaults; and starved and neglected and malnourished.

We were told that there may be as many as 60,000 children abused in our nation and that as many as 600 to 700 die each year as a result. Today, with more accurate reporting, statistics suggest that there may be as many as 100,000 to 200,000 American children who are physically abused by parents or guardians each year and that as many as 2,000 die each year, or one child every four hours.

We reached three major conclusions as the result of our hearings.

- First, neither federal nor state laws had come to grips with the problem of child abuse and neglect. In the states, the focus was almost entirely on prosecuting cases. There were few treatment programs. We discovered that on the federal level there was not one full-time person with responsibility for child abuse and neglect treatment or prevention efforts.

- Second, no single discipline or profession alone could respond adequately to this problem. The social, legal, medical and psychological aspects cannot be separated. We found that child abuse can be dealt with best through a team approach involving many agencies and disciplines. Self-help groups made up of abusing parents, themselves, are sometimes the most effective treatment of all.

- The third discovery we made was more subtle, but perhaps it was the most important. It was that our efforts to deal with child abuse must build upon the family as the first line of defense, and that means treating, and hopefully, rehabilitating the abusing parent. Of course, for some parents criminal penalties and separation from the child are the only appropriate response. But we found that the challenge in most cases is not just to rescue the battered child from the home, but to rescue the home for the child.

"For so long," Jolly K. testified before our subcommittee, "the child abuser was the modern Salem Witch. We were the
horrible monsters who did these things to our children.” But as our subcommittee discovered, in most cases abusing parents are not monsters. Despite their image, we found that most child abusers are simply disturbed people, from all walks of life and income levels, who do not know how to cope with the pressures of their lives. Often, alcoholism, drug abuse and marital conflicts, or problems with jobs and family income were associated with child abuse. In many cases, the abusing parent was abused as a child, himself.

In Denver, a child abuse team found that in only 10 percent of their cases, the children had to be permanently removed from the home. In the remaining 90 percent, the children were returned to the home within 8 or 9 months of the incident after both they and their parents received treatment.

In 1973, the Congress responded to our hearings and the growing national concern about this issue by passing my “Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act” by an overwhelming margin. This past April, Congress extended the Act for an additional four years. Since that time, we have seen important progress all across the country in our efforts to come to grips with this social malignancy of child abuse.

The National Center of Child Abuse and Neglect, established by the Act, has become a focus and catalyst for national efforts to respond to this problem. It has served as a clearinghouse to gather accurate information on the extent of abuse and neglect; to carry out research efforts; and to provide technical assistance and training to states and local groups. Funds have been provided for demonstration programs, including self-help groups, throughout the United States.

Crisis nurseries, lay therapy programs, residential treatment centers, and therapeutic day schools for abused children have been established. Over the past five years, Parents Anonymous has grown from 60 to over 850 chapters. Over 60 hot-lines have been set up.

Major improvements in the quality of services provided by the states have been made. The number of states eligible for special federal grants under the Act has jumped from 3 in 1974 to 42 in 1977. That means at least 42 states now provide a guardian ad litem for all children involved in child protective court cases; promptly investigate cases of neglect as well as abuse; provide for
impartial outside investigation of allegations of institutional abuse and neglect; and guarantee confidentiality of case records.

Most important of all, the subject of child abuse and neglect has come out of the closet and is being discussed openly, publicly and forthrightly today. We will never solve the problem of child abuse so long as it is considered too shocking for polite society. And we will not protect abused children by treating all their parents as social lepers.

It is encouraging that child abuse has been the subject of major news specials on television and in other media. The dramatic increase in reported cases is less likely evidence of a rapid increase in child abuse than of a new national awareness of the problems throughout our society; a growing sense of collective responsibility to deal with it; and an increased willingness by parents, neighbors, social workers, doctors, law enforcement personnel and others to report suspected cases.

Much more needs to be done. Existing resources and treatment programs remain inadequate. We still do not know enough about the causes of child abuse and how social pressures and tensions contribute to this problem. Government at all levels, particularly the federal government, must reassess the impact of its programs all across the board in taxes, in welfare, in housing and in many other areas to correct and eliminate those which add to family strains and to find new ways, without interfering in family life, to provide families with the support they need.

We cannot afford to relax our efforts or become complacent about the progress we have made. Nor can we afford to delay. The price of failure in even a single case of child abuse is simply unacceptable. As Erik Erikson once wrote: “The deadliest of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child’s spirit.” For some the psychological scars will never fully be healed. For those who die, all of our efforts have been too late.

Above all, we must continue to focus the spotlight of public attention on the problem of child abuse. Helpless children cannot speak out for themselves. As a society we must give them a voice. That is why this Chicago-Kent Law Review Symposium is so important. For in the long run, it is public attention, public understanding, and public concern which will protect the battered child and provide the resources to rehabilitate many abusing parents.
I am honored to contribute to the Symposium. I hope it will be part of a renewed effort throughout our nation, not just to prevent child abuse and neglect, but to build a society in which strong, loving, secure families can grow and prosper and flourish.