

Child Abuse and Neglect:

Section 1: Introduction to Child Abuse and Neglect

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Colorado Department
of Public Health
and Environment



Colorado
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Introduction to Child Abuse and Neglect



It has been said that children are our greatest natural resource. As such, the children of Colorado deserve care and protection to keep them from harm. This care currently includes thousands of professionals representing diverse disciplines such as medicine, law, social work, public health and education. Such diverse representation dedicated to this concern is indicative of the complexity of the problem of child maltreatment.

Since the publication of *The Battered Child* in 1962 (Kempe et al), child maltreatment has been “on the radar” of these professionals who have endeavored tirelessly to research the causes of maltreatment and to initiate methods and systems by which children can be protected.

The Purpose of the Child Abuse and Neglect Manual

The purpose of this manual is to educate professionals and the general public about the width and depth of the issue of child abuse and neglect. This manual contains information concerning the prevention of child abuse and neglect, the definitions of child abuse and neglect, legal matters concerning abuse and neglect, as well as the reporting of child abuse and neglect in Colorado.

The Scope of Child Maltreatment

Child maltreatment, as generally defined, includes both abuse and neglect of children. Of these two general types, neglect represents approximately 60 percent of all child maltreatment and physical abuse represents approximately 20 percent. Additionally, sexual abuse represents approximately 10 percent of child maltreatment and approximately 7 percent is emotional maltreatment.

Nationally, more than 3.4 million reports of child maltreatment were made to local child protection agencies in 2004. Of these, over 870,000 were substantiated as abuse or neglect. In approximately 85 percent of the cases, these victims of maltreatment were abused and/or neglected by biological parents or another family figure. (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2006). Nationwide, approximately 1,500 children died of maltreatment although some studies indicate that this aspect of child maltreatment may be grossly underascertained (Crume et al, 2002, Herman-Giddens et al, 1999).

In Colorado during 2004, there were 45,796 reports of child maltreatment made to county departments of social services or human services. Of these, 10,542 were found to be substantiated, making the rate of child abuse and neglect in Colorado to be approximately 9.1 individual children per 1,000. This represents a 23 percent increase from 2003, when the rate of substantiations was 7.4 per 1,000 children. The pattern of perpetrator relationship to the child in Colorado follows the national pattern: 78.5 percent of perpetrators were biological parents or another family figure.

Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect

There are multiple causes of child abuse and neglect. No true consensus exists about specific causes, but most people agree that child abuse occurs as a result of multiple stressors that interact with and reinforce each other.

Certain factors may often be present in families in which abuse occurs, but their presence will not always result in abuse and neglect. Professionals must recognize multiple causes of the problem and must individualize their assessment and treatment of children and families.



Introduction

One must consider factors associated with child abuse and categorize them according to factors related to parents, children, families and the environment.

Parent Factors

The most consistent finding is that abusive parents often report having been physically, sexually or emotionally abused or neglected themselves as children (Garbarino, 1984). It would be incorrect to conclude, however, that all abused children grow up to be abusive parents. Some individuals who were not abused as children will become abusive, while some individuals who were abused as children will not.

No consistent set of personality traits has been identified in abusive parents. However, some characteristics are commonly identified in some parents: low self-esteem, low intelligence, impulsivity, isolation (from extended family and community), loneliness, fear of rejection, depression, low frustration tolerance, immaturity and criminal behavior, among others. Substance abuse also is a significant defining characteristic (Ammerman & Patz, 1996).

A variety of problems resulting from a lack of skills and knowledge also have been suggested as characteristic of abusive parents including: lack of parenting skills, overuse of physical punishment, problems with coping and self-control, marital difficulties and lack of interpersonal skills (Goldstein et al, 1985), as well as lack of knowledge about child development.

Situational stressors, such as unplanned pregnancy or parental illness, also may increase the likelihood of abuse. Single parents may be at higher risk due to higher stressors and, in many instances, lower income, although single parents do not necessarily have lower income than some two-parent households in which only one parent works outside of the home.

Child Factors

A child's behavior may increase the likelihood of abuse, especially if the parent is unable to empathize with the child. In general, children who are "different" from their peers (for example, children with disabilities or children who are socially isolated) are at greater risk for abuse and neglect (Ammerman & Patz, 1996).

Family Factors

Life stressors, such as marital conflict, difficult extended family relationships, drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, financial stress and isolation may increase the likelihood that abuse will occur. In high-risk families, communication between parent and child tends to be poor, and abusive parents often use ineffective and inconsistent discipline. The importance of attachment and bonding between child and caretaker cannot be ignored (Goldstein et al, 1985).

Environmental/Community Factors

It is important to note that factors such as poverty are associated with child abuse, a relationship indicated by an increase in rates during times of recession and parental job loss. Environmental factors are only one facet of child abuse.

Maltreating families are often isolated from neighbors and the broader community. As a result, maltreating families tend to participate less in community organizations and make less use of available economic, health and social resources (Goldstein et al, 1985).

Dr. Deborah Daro, a child abuse treatment and prevention researcher, reports: "Children continue to die at a rate of three each day as a result of child abuse and neglect. Perhaps most tragically, the youngest children are most at risk. We are very concerned that young children, who are least able to protect themselves, continue to be fatal victims at the hands of parents and caretakers (Wang & Daro, 1998)."



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Section Notes: