

# Factsheet 2

## What is child abuse?

There are four main types of abuse:

**Physical Abuse** is where children are hurt or injured by parents or others. It includes hitting, kicking and beating. These can cause pain, cuts, bruising, broken bones and sometimes even death.

**Emotional Abuse** includes degrading punishment, sarcasm, threats and not giving love and attention. All of these can undermine a child or young person's confidence.

**Neglect** occurs when children's basic needs, such as food, warmth, medical care, clothing and hygiene, are not met by their parents.

**Sexual Abuse** occurs when children are forced or persuaded into sexual acts or situations by others.

## Recognition of child abuse

Throughout history there has always been cruelty towards children. Many of the national children's organisations were founded at the end of the nineteenth century: the RSSPCC (CHILDREN 1<sup>ST</sup>), the NSPCC, NCH and Barnardo's. They were created to deal with the problems of child cruelty and neglect, child destitution or children begging.

In recent years we have become more aware of child abuse. It is often said that child abuse was 'rediscovered' in the late 1960s-early 1970s. For example, in America in 1962, Henry Kempe, a paediatrician, described 'battered baby syndrome'. Kempe suggested that baby battering existed on a much larger scale than had previously been recognised. As a result of his work, doctors became more skilled in recognising the physical signs of abuse. Another defining event was the 1973 inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell. Maria, aged 7, had been killed by her stepfather after being returned home from care. The tragedy attracted much media attention and brought child abuse firmly to the attention of the public.

## Who abuses children?

There is no typical child abuser. In most cases of child abuse, the child knows the abuser. Usually abusers are people with intimate access to a child, whom the child loves or trusts and is dependent on for care. It may be a member of the child's family or another person in a position of trust. Children may also be abused by strangers.

## Why do people abuse children?

Abuse can happen in any family. There are different ideas about what leads to adults abusing children. Certain factors seem to increase a child's chance of being physically abused or neglected. For example, violence between the parents, or other family stress perhaps because of financial problems, or because the parents are isolated and have no support. Parenting is a very difficult job and many parents find it hard to cope. However, it is important to remember that many children living in the most difficult circumstances never experience abuse.

## What are the effects of child abuse?

It is very difficult for a child to tell someone what is happening to him or her. Often children feel ashamed about what has happened to them and think it is their fault. They may be frightened of what will happen if they tell anyone. It can be difficult for adults to tell that a child is being abused because it usually takes place in private. Sexual abuse, in particular, is characterised by secrecy and people in the same household may be unaware that it is happening.

Child abuse can cause physical injury, but can also leave emotional scars. Abuse can lead to low self esteem because children often blame themselves for it. In later life adults abused as children may find it difficult to form relationships because they are unable to trust people. All forms of abuse have a harmful effect on children and young people.

## How many children are abused?

It is very difficult to tell how widespread child abuse is. This is because most child abuse is never reported, either by the child or by other adults who know it is happening. It is also because there is no single source of information on child abuse in Scotland, and the sources of information that do exist miss out certain things. Another thing to bear in mind is that children often experience more than one type of abuse.

## Child protection statistics

The Scottish Executive gathers statistics on child protection from local authorities in Scotland. The best publicised statistics are on the numbers of children referred to local authority social work departments, and on the numbers of children on local authority child protection registers.

### In the year ending on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2002

- 7,172 children were referred to social work departments for child protection enquiries
- 2,018 children were registered on local authorities' child protection registers. The most common reason for being registered was physical abuse.

For a child to be registered on the child protection register, his or her case must have been the subject of a formal investigation, a case conference and an 'inter-agency child protection plan'. Not all the referrals made to social work get to this stage because it may be decided, after initial enquiries or following a formal investigation, that the case does not need further action under child protection proceedings.

Changes in the numbers of children on child protection registers are often the focus of media attention. It must be remembered however that the number of children on child protection registers is not a reliable indication of the numbers of children who are abused. This is because the child protection register includes some children who have not been abused, but are thought to be at risk, and it excludes some children who have been abused, but are not thought to be at risk, perhaps because the abuser has left the household.

The numbers of children on the child protection register are affected by changes in public awareness and willingness to report concerns about abuse, and by the awareness and reporting practices of social workers and other professionals involved. These have changed over time and vary in different areas of the country.

## Research studies

Since most abuse is not reported to the authorities, research has been done on people's experiences in order to find out how many of them have experienced child abuse. The most respected study, 'Child Maltreatment in the UK',<sup>1</sup> asked a random sample of 2,689 young adults about their experience of family life, abuse, bullying and discrimination as well as their views on the acceptable treatment of children. It found that, of the sample:

- 7% had experienced serious physical abuse by parents or carers
- 6% had experienced serious absence of care (neglect)
- 5% had experienced serious absence of supervision (neglect)
- 1% had experienced sexual abuse by parents or carers, almost always fathers or step fathers. (If sexual abuse involving physical contact by others is included, such as siblings and other children or young people, this figure rises to 11%).
- 6% had experienced emotional abuse

Very few of these cases of abuse had been reported to the authorities.

This study is likely to have underestimated the level of child abuse since the survey did not include young people who were homeless or in institutions, among whom there are likely to be higher rates of abuse. Also, over half the young adults in the survey were still living with their parents and may therefore have been less likely to report being abused.

## Statistics on crimes committed against children

- In the year 2000, there were legal proceedings against 436 people for child abuse. 231 were for sexual offences and 205 for non-sexual offences.
- In 2001, 10 children under the age of 15 were the victims of homicide

Again, statistics on crimes committed against children are not reliable indicators of the extent of child abuse, because criminal justice statistics do not show all crimes committed against children. This is because, for some sexual crimes, and for most offences involving physical violence, the victim's age is not recorded by police. And of course, as with the child protection statistics above, they only reflect the small proportion of abuse that is reported.

## What happens when abuse is reported?

Child protection is every adult's responsibility. Two studies<sup>2</sup> found that between 94 and 97 per cent of abuse is not reported and so these children remain in dangerous and harmful situations. It is essential that adults report concerns about a child, so that the abuse stops and the child can be helped to recover.

Many people are reluctant to report suspected child abuse, because they are afraid that the abuser will be sent to prison or the child taken away from home. This is not necessarily the case. The priority will be to stop the abuse, keeping the family together where possible. In a small number of cases where it is felt that the child will not be safe, a child may be looked after by a relative or the Local Authority. Most of these children return home as soon as it is felt they will be safe.

A concerned adult can contact the local social work department, the police, or the Children's Reporter about a child. Social work and the police have a joint responsibility to make enquiries about child abuse.

When the social work department or the police are told about a child who may be being abused, they may decide, after making enquiries, that a formal investigation is not necessary – and no further action needs to be taken, or support services may be provided to the family. If the referral is serious enough to need further action, a formal investigation is made. If the investigation suggests that action is needed to protect the child, a case conference will be held.

A **case conference** is a meeting of all the different services who may be involved with the child and may therefore have relevant information. It can include the social worker for the child and family, doctors, teachers, health visitors, the police and nursery staff. These different services, such as health, education, social work and the police, are known as 'agencies'.

The case conference will assess the risk to the child and decide if action is needed to protect the child and what that should be. The conference may decide that a child's name does not need to be placed on the child protection register and the case may be closed or support services may be provided to the family instead. Where it is agreed that a child's name should be placed on the child protection register, a 'child protection plan' is agreed, setting out how the child's needs can be met by all the various agencies. The case conference will also decide whether to refer the child to the Children's Reporter.

The **Children's Reporter** is an independent person who has statutory powers for the protection and wellbeing of children. When the Children's Reporter

receives information that a child may be in need of 'compulsory supervision' (see below), he or she must make further enquiries in order to decide what to do. He or she will decide either to take no further action, to refer the child to the social work department for voluntary supervision, or to refer the child to a children's hearing.

The Children's Reporter will decide to refer a child to a **children's hearing** if he or she judges that there is sufficient evidence that the child needs compulsory supervision. If the parents or the child do not accept the reasons for being referred to the children's hearing, the case is referred to the Sheriff for a decision on whether these are correct.

Children's hearings are informal tribunals which make decisions about the care, protection and supervision of children, based on their best interests. A children's hearing is made up of trained volunteer members of the public, who listen to what the children and his or her parents or carers say, and read reports written by social work on the case. They decide whether to discharge the case or to make a 'supervision requirement'. The hearing may appoint an adult, called a 'safeguarder' to help the child express his or her views or present his or her interests. Children's hearings listen to all the information about the case and try to come to an agreement between the family and professionals about the best thing for the child. However, they can make a 'supervision requirement' which is legally enforceable if necessary.

Compulsory Supervision: A '**supervision requirement**' places the child under the supervision of the local authority and is usually carried out by the social work department. Depending on the circumstances of the case, a supervision requirement may require the child to live in a certain place or it can give authority for a child's liberty to be restricted. Supervision can include supervision at home, with a relative, in foster care, a children's home or in secure accommodation. Conditions can be attached – such as regulating the child's contact with a particular person. The child or his or her parents/carers can appeal against any of the decisions of a children's hearing.

If at any stage in the process there is a need for urgent action to protect the child from immediate danger, there are procedures for temporarily removing the child from his or her home until investigations are complete.

If it appears that a crime has been committed against a child, there may be a **criminal investigation** by the police alongside the child protection enquiries and children's hearing proceedings. Following a joint investigation by police and social work, the police will send reports of suspected crimes to the Procurator Fiscal. He or she will decide whether criminal proceedings are in the public interest, and assess whether there is sufficient evidence to bring criminal proceedings against an alleged perpetrator of abuse.

## Where to find help

### Information for children and young people

If you are unhappy or worried about something that is happening to you it is important that you tell someone.

### **Talk to an Adult**

If you are unable to talk to your parents you can talk to another adult you trust, for example, your gran, a teacher or youth club leader. You could also contact the social work department or police directly. The most important thing is that you don't keep the worry to yourself.

There is a helpline for children and young people who need to speak about problems.

### **ChildLine Helpline - Telephone 0800 1111**

A call to ChildLine is free at any time of the day or night. It won't show up on the phone bill. ChildLine deal with any kind of problem, including abuse. If you don't want to phone you can write to them at ChildLine Scotland, Freepost 1111, Glasgow G1 1BR. You do not need a stamp.

### Information for adults

You may know or suspect that a child is being abused or harmed in some way. If you are unsure of what to do, where to go, or afraid of what will happen if you tell - you are not alone. Many people feel this way. **Child protection is every adult's responsibility.** By voicing your concerns, you could help prevent a child being abused or harmed.

### **If a child tells you they have been abused:**

- let them know you take them seriously
- praise them for telling
- tell them it is not their fault
- talk with the child about what needs to happen next

Every situation is different. If you would like to talk things through, you can call our free helpline **ParentLine Scotland** on **0808 800 2222**. We will listen and help you work through what you need to do and what support is available.

### **Where to get help:**

- call the Police if you think a child is in immediate danger
- contact your local Social Work Office
- speak to a healthcare worker such as a family doctor or health visitor
- contact the school
- you can also give information to the Children's Reporter who will decide what action to take. The Reporter is an independent official who can decide if there is a need to take action to protect a child.

All of these numbers are in your local telephone book.

## Useful CHILDREN 1<sup>ST</sup> publications

### For children

**The Huge Bag of Worries** - If you have a worry, don't keep it to yourself. It will get BIGGER and BIGGER. Share it with someone else. Suitable for younger children.

### For Young People

**'Hands Off!'** - a magazine to raise awareness among 12-17 year olds of the nature of sexual abuse, that it is never their fault and advising on what to do to prevent and stop sexual abuse. 'Hands Off!' is written in the lively and easy-to-read style of a youth magazine telling young people about sex abuse and how to deal with it. Above all it encourages teenagers to find someone who can give them help and support.

### References

<sup>1</sup> Cawson et al, 2000

<sup>2</sup> Sidebotham, et al, 2000; Kelly et al, 1991

### Sources

1. Cawson, P. et al (2000): *Child Maltreatment in the United Kingdom: a study of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect*, London: NSPCC, cited in Hooper, C., 2002
2. Sidebotham, P. & the ALSPAC Study Team (2000) 'Patterns of Child Abuse in Early Childhood: a cohort study of the "children of the nineties"' in *Child Abuse Review*, 9 pp 311-20, cited in Hooper, C., 2002
3. Hooper, C. (2002) 'Maltreatment of Children', in Bradshaw (ed.) *The Wellbeing of Children in the UK*, York: Save the Children
4. Kelly, L. et al (1991) *An Exploratory Study of Sexual Abuse in a Sample of 16-21 year olds*, ESRC end of award report, cited in Hooper, C., 2002
5. Mellon, M. (ed.) (2003) *Factfile 2003: facts and figures about Scotland's Children*, London: NCH
6. Scottish Executive (2002) *Child Protection Statistics for the Year 2002*, [www.scotland.gov.uk](http://www.scotland.gov.uk)

CHILDREN 1<sup>ST</sup> believes that child protection is everybody's responsibility. As human beings we enjoy rights as well as obligations – such as to protect children from harm. It is now time for every adult to take responsibility for keeping children safe!

For further information please contact:  
Information Assistant, Central Information Unit  
CHILDREN 1<sup>ST</sup>  
83 Whitehouse Loan,  
Edinburgh EH9 1AT,  
Tel: 0131 446 2300 Fax : 0131 446 2339  
E-mail: [info@children1st.org.uk](mailto:info@children1st.org.uk)  
Web: [www.children1st.org.uk](http://www.children1st.org.uk)

For over 100 years CHILDREN 1<sup>ST</sup>, The Royal Scottish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children, has been working to give every child in Scotland a safe and secure childhood.