

CHILD MALTREATMENT PREVENTION THROUGH POSITIVE PARENTING PRACTICES¹

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Child maltreatment is a global problem with serious consequences. It affects the entire community as it does not only occur within the family context, but spills over into the community and broader society. Child maltreatment causes suffering to children and families and can have long-term negative consequences (WHO, 2010). These consequences include impaired lifelong physical and mental health, as well as negative social and occupational outcomes (WHO, 2010). There are no reliable global estimates for the prevalence of child maltreatment as data for many countries, especially low- and middle-income countries, are lacking.

Violence is a key feature of South African society and child violence, abuse and neglect is widely reported. Child abuse is on the rapid increase in South Africa, with a child being raped every three minutes (Solidarity, 2009). According to a 2009 report released by Solidarity, 60 cases of child rape as well as 13 cases of child abuse are reported in South Africa every day. The sad fact, however, is that it is estimated that 88% of all rape incidents are never reported (Solidarity, 2009). According to the South African Police Services (SAPS, 2010/2011), 28 128 children were victims of sexual offenses between April 2010 and March 2011. Of this total, 906 were killed, and 11 018 were assaulted with the intent to do grievous bodily harm. An alarming fact is that in 2008/2009 60.5 % of recorded cases of sexual offences against children were committed against children below 15 years of age. An even more shocking statistic is that 29.4% of these sexual offences involve children between the ages of 0 - 10 years.

Accordingly, the ultimate goal of intervention is to stop child maltreatment before it starts. Thus, early identification of child maltreatment is critical to the well-being of children and their families. The role of family functioning in the assessment and intervention of child maltreatment can serve as a buffer against child maltreatment within the family context. Effective prevention programmes support parents or caregivers and promote positive parenting skills. Positive parenting skills include effective communication, appropriate discipline, and responding to the children's physical and emotional needs. Ongoing care of children and families can provide the impetus to firstly, reduce the risk of child maltreatment from persisting and strengthen the protective factors; and secondly, prevent the occurrence of new instances of maltreatment.



WHAT IS CHILD MALTREATMENT?

Child maltreatment is the abuse and neglect of children under 18 years of age. It includes all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which result in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power. Exposure to intimate partner violence is also sometimes included as a form of child maltreatment (WHO, 1999, p.15).

WHAT ARE RISK FACTORS?

Risk factors are negative influences in the lives of children or communities. These factors may increase the risk of child maltreatment and may also increase the likelihood that individuals engage in child maltreatment or become victims.

WHAT ARE PROTECTIVE FACTORS?

Protective factors are positive influences that can improve the lives of children or the safety of communities. These factors may decrease the likelihood that children are exposed to child maltreatment.

The following table provides a brief overview of some of the parenting risk and protective factors with regards to child maltreatment:

RISK FACTORS	PROTECTIVE FACTORS
Children may be more at risk of abuse and violence if:	Risk may be reduced by:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parenting is more difficult because the parent/ caregiver lacks understanding of children's needs and development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthening family and community support networks. Caregivers modelling effective problem-solving skills.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical force is used as discipline in the home. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finding alternative forms of discipline in the home.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a lack of family cohesion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing the sense of cohesion and harmony in families.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parent/caregiver has difficulty bonding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fostering secure attachment of the child to the parent/caregiver.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents/caregivers are socially isolated. Families are under a great deal of stress, such as unemployment, socioeconomic instability, financial difficulties, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing supportive social networks (friends & family).

Fact

The World Health Organization [WHO] has estimated that 40 million children under 15 years old suffer from maltreatment and moral neglect, and require healthcare and social protection (WWSF, 2011).

¹Abrahams, T., & Suffla, S. (Eds.) (In press). *Child safety, peace and health: A trainer's manual*. Johannesburg & Cape Town: MRC-UNISA Safety & Peace Promotion Research Unit.



RECOGNISING ABUSE

Children who have been abused may display a range of emotional and behavioural reactions, many of which are characteristic of children who have experienced other types of trauma.

According to the WHO (2006), the following behaviours are some of the indicators that may suggest abuse:

- Being nervous of physical contact with adults.
- Crying when it is time to leave a protected environment.
- An increase in nightmares and/or other sleeping difficulties.
- Withdrawn behaviour.
- Angry outbursts.
- Anxiety.
- Depression.
- Not wanting to be left alone with a particular individual(s).
- Lying and stealing.
- Sexual knowledge, language, and/or behaviours that are inappropriate for the child's age.
- Absence from school, etc.

PREVENTION OF CHILD MALTREATMENT

The family is the first line of protection for children. Parents and caregivers are responsible for building a protective and loving home environment in order that they grow, learn and develop to their fullest potential. Effective family functioning therefore functions as a buffer against child maltreatment.

Child maltreatment can be prevented by the following positive parenting practices:

1. Discipline effectively:
 - Establishing clear rules
 - Use praise
 - Lead by example
 - Have realistic expectations of children
 - Use a firm tone of voice but do not shout
 - Choose your battles
2. Instead of physical punishment, use alternative methods to change behaviour.
3. Communicate effectively.
4. Problem - solve effectively.

AS A PARENT/CAREGIVER HOW CAN YOU PREVENT CHILD MALTREATMENT

- You should never discipline your child when your anger is out of control.
- You should get involved in your child's activities and get to know his/her friends.
- You should avoid leaving your child unattended and unsupervised.
- You need to teach your child the difference between "good touches," "bad touches" and "confusing touches."
- When your child tells you he/she does not want to be with someone, you should be concerned. You need to listen to him/her and believe what he/she says.
- You need to be aware of changes in your child's behaviour or attitude, and inquire into it.
- Your child needs to know what to do if he/she becomes separated from you while away from home.
- You need to teach your child the correct names of his/her private body parts.
- You need to be alert for any talk that reveals premature sexual understanding.
- You must pay attention when someone shows greater than normal interest in your child.
- You need to make certain that your child's crèche/school will release him/her only to you or someone you officially authorise.

Fact

Emotional abuse is one of the most common and harmful forms of child maltreatment and can have a lifelong impact, affecting children's ability to feel safe and loved, how they relate to others, and their overall self-esteem.

All children need acceptance, love, encouragement, discipline, consistency, stability and positive attention.

Effective parenting is one of the most powerful ways to prevent behavioural problems in adolescent years (WWSF, 2011).

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU SUSPECT CHILD ABUSE

- Always be guided by what is in the best interest of the child.
- You are legally obligated to report the abuse to the appropriate authorities in good faith.
- It is a criminal offence not to report a suspected case of child abuse.
- Determine the child's immediate need for safety.
- If the child cannot remain in the environment, then you should immediately report the case to the:
 - » Police Official by contacting the nearest police station on 10111.
 - » Statutory Social Worker by contacting CHILDLINE on 08000 55 555 for children under 12 years.
 - » Provincial Department of Social Development for children over 12 years.
 - » Make notes of all references, contacts and relevant documents and write down the name of the person you reported the case to.

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