

The Causes and Prevention of Child Abuse

Are these statements true or false?

- *Most parents who hurt their children are severely ill emotionally.*
- *Abusive parents usually hate their children.*
- *The major cause of child abuse is poverty.*
- *The best way to deal with child abuse is to take the child out of the home.*

(These statements are all false.)

Hurting a child is a terrible thing. Yet each year more than a million children are abused by their parents.

Feeling so angry that you strike out at a child is a terrible thing, too. But in about one in five families, parents take their frustrations out on their children. Usually these people are reacting to extreme stress in their lives. That's why it's often said there are two victims in child abuse, the child and the parent.

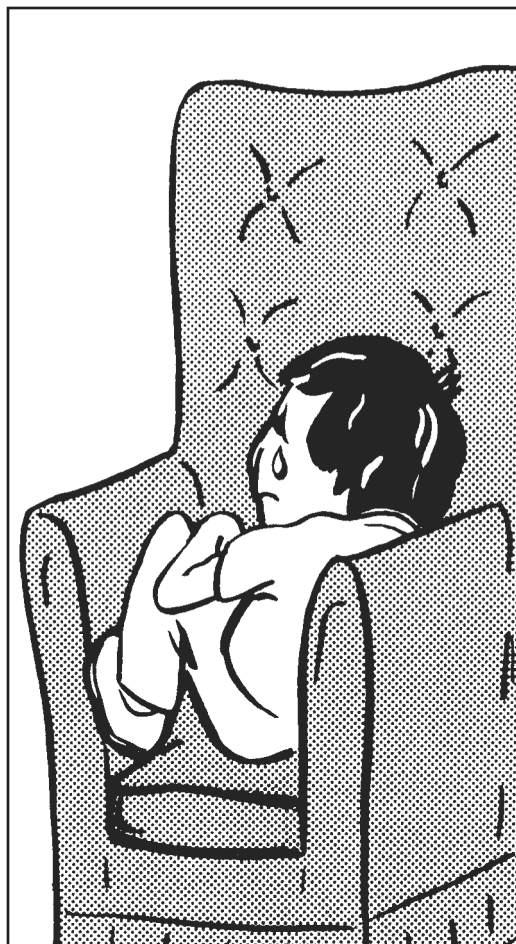
Methods of abuse



Children are abused in ways that are shocking. Children can be cut and bruised. They can be burned with cigarettes and boiling water. They can be knocked around and pushed down stairs, resulting in damage to their brains and spinal cords. Some children are killed or permanently disabled.

Abuse does not have to be physical though. Children who are told again and again they are stupid, ugly, or unwanted are being abused. So are those whose parents ignore them. This verbal and emotional abuse can leave children with scars as deep as those left by physical abuse.

And these scars do not fade quickly. Some abused children become hostile and violent. Others bottle up their rage and withdraw from the world. Some die because they lose their will to live. Many of those who survive go on to hurt their own children.



Causes of abuse



Sometimes you may have felt like hurting a child. Most parents have. Usually, however, they stop themselves in time. When parents cannot control their angry feelings, it often is because:

- They were badly treated as children.
- They have a problem such as a shaky marriage or more children than they can handle.
- They feel all alone.
- They were taught harsh methods of discipline that can lead to violence.
- They feel resentful because their children are unwanted, handicapped, or difficult to handle.

When these pressures combine, a crisis may be all that is needed to bring years of anger to the surface and make a parent take that anger out on a child.

EC 1290-E

Reprinted February 2006

H E L P I N G • C H I L D R E N • G R O W

Helping prevent abuse

Rather than blaming abusive parents, it is more useful to relieve their stress. It always helps to have a friend who cares during times of fear and loneliness, offers support when the going gets rough, listens with compassion, and provides information about available services.

Of course, some abusive parents reject offers of help and may need professional care. Sometimes, however, a crisis demands intervention. In some cases, you may have no choice but to report these parents to the proper authorities. In most areas, this is the local Children's Services Division.

The most important thing is to be involved. After all, a child's future is at stake.

Community support



Many parents who abuse their children would like to get help, but they're afraid to ask for it. They fear they will be punished or that their children will be taken away from them. Sometimes they just don't know help is available. In most of the following programs, the goal is to keep the family together. More often than not, children are allowed to remain with their parents.

Hotlines. Hotlines give parents someone to talk with, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Hotline staffers are trained to cope with very upset people. They decide what response is needed, from offering a sympathetic ear to sending out a police car or ambulance.

Emergency shelters. Emergency shelters offer children a refuge in times of need. Parents can leave children at these places when they "just can't take it any more." Or they can drop children off while they go for treatment. Emergency shelters are open 24 hours a day and are staffed with people who understand the needs of abused children and their parents.

Homemakers. Homemakers are people trained in housekeeping and family care. They go into the home for a few days or weeks when parents are having trouble managing by themselves. Homemakers try to relieve parents of some of their child care responsibilities. They also help parents find less stressful ways to run the household.

Self-help groups. Parents Anonymous, the best known of the self-help groups, is run by parents themselves. Parents Anonymous gives abusing parents a chance to talk about their feelings with other parents who have similar problems. It provides an accepting atmosphere where parents can help each other.

Parent trainers. Also known as lay therapists, parent trainers serve as friends and lifelines to the outside world. They offer parents whatever kind of help is needed at the moment. This could be a ride to the hospital or a shoulder to cry on. Sometimes long-term friendships develop between abusing parents and their aides.

Therapy. In some cases, individual or group treatment with a psychotherapist is appropriate. This process can help parents uncover the sources of their unhappiness. In therapy, parents explore more satisfying ways of meeting their needs as well as those of their children.

You can find the telephone numbers for these support groups through your local county office of the Oregon State University Extension Service, your county health department, or local Children's Services Division. These numbers also are in the telephone book, under your county and state listings.

Reprinted from a University of Maryland Cooperative Extension Service publication and adapted for use in Oregon by Cindee M. Bailey, former Extension child development specialist, Oregon State University.

This publication may be photocopied or reprinted in its entirety for noncommercial purposes.

This publication was produced and distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914. Extension work is a cooperative program of Oregon State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Oregon counties. Oregon State University Extension Service offers educational programs, activities, and materials—without discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, age, marital status, disability, or disabled veteran or Vietnam-era veteran status. Oregon State University Extension Service is an Equal Opportunity Employer.

Published January 1988; Reprinted February 2006