

ABUSE

If you have had a guest speaker talk to your class, this information may have already been presented. You may choose to present only the information not covered by the speaker. Check local resources to get the latest statistics available.

In Utah, child abuse is defined as any harm or threatened harm to a child's health or welfare that is nonaccidental.

Abuse often occurs where the family is isolated from the outside support of friends or extended family members. Each of us has risk factors that put us at risk for becoming abusive. We have no control over some risk factors, but we can reduce or eliminate many other factors. Some factors are:

1. Abused or neglected as a child.
2. Substance use and/or abuse.
3. Few friends or close ties.
4. Low self-image.
5. Unrealistic expectations of children and their abilities.
6. Little knowledge of children's basic needs or growth and development.
7. Need to blame others or find a scapegoat for problems.
8. Inability to accept children as individuals who have talents and unique traits.
9. Inability to handle pressure and stressful situations.
10. Harsh erratic discipline style.
11. Single parenting.

Let students brainstorm ways that they can reduce their own risk for becoming an abusive parent.

There are four types of child abuse: physical abuse, child neglect, sexual abuse, and mental injury.

PHYSICAL ABUSE AND CHILD NEGLECT:

Physical abuse includes shaking, beating, burning, and failure to provide the necessities of life (neglect). More than three children a day die from physical abuse and neglect that is reported. It is believed that as many as 5,000 children actually die each year from abuse or neglect. Sixty to 70 percent of these deaths happen to children under 2 1/2 years of age.

The death rate among infants is higher because they are more vulnerable and are unable to run away from angry parents. In fact, half of all babies who die within their first year of life are murdered by their parents.

Eighty percent of all physical abuse is from "spanking." Twenty-five to 42 percent of parents spank babies under six months of age. Fifty percent spank children under one year of age, and 87 percent spank children under two years of age.

SEXUAL ABUSE:

Child sexual abuse cases have increased 343 percent in the past five years in Utah. Sexual abuse is the most underreported form of child maltreatment. In fact, only one in ten incidences are reported. A victim of incest is not likely to report it to authorities. It is believed that by age 18, one out of three females have experienced some form of sexual abuse while one out of five males have experienced some form of sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse may be nonphysical, physical, or violent. Nonphysical incidents include indecent exposure, obscene phone calls, or peeping toms. Physical incidences may include genital or oral stimulation, fondling, or sexual intercourse. Violent incidents include forcible rape, beatings, sodomy (anal or oral intercourse), or other physical abuses of a sexual nature. Incidents may occur just once or may be repeated many times.

The majority of all sexual abuses are committed by someone the child know and trusts. Half of all abusers are under age 31. A person who sexually abuses has severe sexual problems and difficulty relating to other adults. The abuser who is a familiar person many begin sexual abuse as an impulse. It may be a response to some unusually stress, such as marital or personal relationship troubles, and can develop into serious sexual disorders.

There are three ways in which the abuser usually tries to control the victim. The first method is coercion. The abuser will try using the power to authority to get the child to go along with the situation. Sometimes the abuser will manipulate the child into "playing a fun game" that results in unwanted physical contact. The abuser may bribe the child with favors, gifts, or candy for the desired behavior.

Sexual abuse includes incest. Incest is sexual activity between family members. This may range from fondling to actual intercourse. Usually a father or stepfather (or father figure) is involved. However, incest between mother and son, father and son, or brother and sister may also occur. Victims range in age from infancy through the teen years.

Child pornography is also included in child sexual abuse. It usually involves the use of children in pornographic magazines, movies, etc. Some victims are offered to pornographers by their parents for a profit. Others may be runaways who have no other way to survive. Many children become involved unknowingly. Child pornography often leads to prostitution. It is degrading and can emotionally scar children.

To help prevent child sexual abuse, teach children how to protect themselves. Teach them to be in charge of their own bodies and help them to understand that no one has the right to touch their body without their permission. Help them to be wary of strangers and not believe or trust them. Teach them not to play alone or use public restrooms alone. Teach them how to deal with phone calls and people at the door when they are home alone. They need to be taught to say "no" and to run away from questionable situations. Help them to feel comfortable in talking to you about any uncomfortable situation they experience and to know that you will believe them.

MENTAL INJURY:

Mental injury may include verbal abuse (demeaning, yelling, belittling, or teasing) and emotional abuse (failure to provide warmth, attention, supervision, and normal living experiences.) Emotional abuse has more long-term effects than physical abuse. Words can hit as hard as a fist. It is maltreatment that results in impaired psychological growth and development.

Mental injury may include rejection; intimidation or humiliation of the child; chaotic, bizarre, or hostile acts producing fear or guilt in the child; lack of nurturing, intimacy of affection, and acceptance; actions that damage the child's intellectual or psychological functioning.

All types of child abuse can happen ANYWHERE. It is not limited to any social or economic group. The United States has the most domestic violence of any country in the world. Child abuse happens often. It is estimated that as many as a million cases of abuse or neglect occur each year.

The effects of child abuse are severe. Emotional or physical handicaps may be lifelong. Injuries inflicted in childhood may result in permanent crippling or deformity. Emotionally, the child may never be able to love and trust other people. Abused children spend their entire lifetimes with a poor self-image.

Often, child abuse will cause victims to exhibit "acting out" behavior. They can exhibit criminal or violent behavior; they may become antisocial or become behavior problems at school or at work.

Sometimes child abuse results in death. Parents who habitually abuse their children may very well end up killing them. Hundreds of such cases happen every year.

What causes parents to abuse their own children? Most frequently, it is a reaction to stresses or problems that they cannot cope with. One stress that they may not be able to cope with is immaturity. Very young, insecure parents may not understand the child's behavior and needs. Unrealistic expectations are another possible cause.

Parents may expect children to behave beyond their capability. For example, a parent may think that a 13-month-old child should be potty trained or that a 2-year-old should behave as an adult. This may result in child abuse that can actually impede the child's normal development and cause the parent to become even further frustrated.

Social isolation may also lead to child abuse. Parents may have no friends or family members to turn to for help or temporary relief from the heavy demands of small children. All parents need a short break every now and then to pull themselves together, unwind, and prepare to go back into the action.

Lack of parenting knowledge may also cause a parent to resort to child abuse. Parents who do not know and understand the stages of child development may not deal well with them. Parents who do not know how to use positive guidance methods may turn to spanking and punitive punishment methods, which frequently develop into abuse. The parents may not have successful family models from which to learn these skills.

The parents' own unmet emotional needs may be the root of child abuse. Parents who do not relate well to other adults may expect their children to take care of them, to satisfy their need for love, affection, protection, and self-esteem.

In many instances, the abusive parent was an abused child him/herself. Having been mistreated as a child, the parent may have a very low self-image, causing the parent to become abusive, or the parent may think that the abuse is "normal" and expected. In difficult situations, they may react the way they have seen their own parents react. Because of this, child abuse is very cyclical in families.

Frequent crisis in a family may also be a cause of child abuse. Stress caused from financial problems, job problems, legal hassles, illnesses, etc., may cause a parent to strike out at a child. The child, who has no control over these problems, becomes the parents' scapegoat.

Drug and alcohol use and abuse may also lead to abuse of children by limiting the parent's ability to care properly for children. These substances also inhibit the parent's judgment, causing him/her to do things that he/she would not normally do. It is believed that 80 to 90 percent of all child abuse cases involve some type of substance abuse.

It is important to keep in mind that every parent has the potential to abuse a child at some time. As a parent, if you feel stress and anger that you are unable to deal with, get help. Call a sitter or get friends or family members to help you with the children while you leave and get a break. After you have gained control, then go back to the children. Be aware of your "breaking point" and take steps to deal the situation before you lose control. A young single mother living with a boyfriend is most likely to become an abuser. Forty-five percent of these women abuse their children. Twenty-eight percent of children are abused by the boyfriend. Children living in this type of situation are five times more likely to be abused. Babysitters are responsible for 28 percent of the maltreatment cases.

There are many resources available to help abusive parents. These include child protective services, child abuse hotlines, social service agency, family counseling services, the police department, family support center, child abuse prevention council, and CAPSA organizations. These are all local (city and county) agencies. In addition, there are national organization that can also be sources of help. They include Parents Anonymous, Children's Division of the American Humane Association, Child Welfare League, and the National Center for Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse. You may also check your local resources for a Parent Education Center that provides parenting education and help in developing appropriate guidance, discipline, and parenting techniques.

Watch for signs of child abuse in other families. Child abuse is curable if it is identified and appropriate action is taken. Common signs of child abuse include repeated injuries, neglected appearance, disruptive behavior, passive or withdrawn behavior, and "super-critical" parents or families that are extremely isolated. Remember that every parent makes errors in judgment at some time. However, when these errors become a pattern or occur frequently, then the family needs help. It is each individual's legal responsibility to report any suspected child abuse to the legal authorities.