

## SPILLED MILK

You are sitting around a dinner table and two-year-old Johnny is present. Johnny's mother gives the boy a tall glass of milk. Before dinner has even begun, Johnny reaches for the glass of milk and sends it tumbling over. Mommy patiently wipes it up and returns with another glass of milk.

Dinner begins and Johnny is still thirsty. Again, he reaches for his glass of milk and as he brings it to his mouth it spills all down the front of him. Mommy wipes up the milk and cleans up Johnny. Again Mommy fills the glass of milk and returns to her own plate.

Only seconds after Mommy has been seated, Johnny reaches for a roll and the glass of milk topples and spills. Mommy cleans it up and fills the glass again.

Just then Johnny decides he does not like squash and with a disgusted grunt he pushes his plate away, bumping the glass over one more time, spilling it all over the table and getting others wet this time. Mommy is embarrassed and apologizes to those present, then wipes up the mess and fills Johnny's glass.

Johnny is getting tired and decides he does not want milk to drink but soda pop instead. When Mommy informs him that he will have to finish his dinner and his milk before getting soda pop, Johnny gets angry and throws the glass of milk on the floor, splashing milk all over everyone and everything.

At what point in the story would you have become angered?

If you were a parent, at what point in the story would you have become angered?

What would you have done in this situation?

For us to prevent child abuse we must understand how stress and our coping threshold makes the difference between becoming abusive or not. Whenever child abuse takes place there are three components present:

$$\text{CHILD} + \text{CARE GIVER} + \text{STRESS} = \text{CHILD ABUSE}$$

**Everyone is a potential child abuser.** There are countless accounts of average, everyday people who have found themselves out of control and have become abusive. To be certain, there are those who are chronic criminal child abusers. There are those who are well-meaning care-givers who get frustrated to the point that they are no longer in control and they end up abusing the child. Today's lesson is focused on average people like you and me. How do we maintain control and prevent abuse?

The first thing we will look at is **stress**. Everyone has a different point at which they lose control. This is what we call **coping threshold** or your ability to deal with stress on any given day.

Remember when we listened to the crying baby? Each of you became frustrated at a different point and time. Some days you may be more easily angered than others.

Some days it seems all has gone well. You got your car fixed and it only cost half as much as you thought it would or your girl or boy friend asked you to the upcoming dance and you got 98% on your chemistry exam. It is easy to be patient and pleasant. Your **coping threshold** is relatively wide and you are not easily angered.

Some days it seems all has gone wrong. You wrecked your car, you had a fight with your boy or girl friend because he/she is taking someone else to the upcoming dance, and you failed your chemistry exam. It is not so easy to be patient and your temper is undoubtedly going to be hotter than usual. Your **coping threshold** is relatively narrow and you are easily angered.

The following are stressors that trigger child abuse. Remember that these are not the only things that can trigger an otherwise loving parent into being an aggressive abusive one.

The presence of any of these stressors can trigger child abuse; however, just because one of these stressors is present, does not mean that the child will be abused.

## STRESSORS :

The stress associated with a child that demands a lot of time and effort (crying, irritable, excessively active, etc.)

**Abused as a child** (25-35% abuse their own children, compared to 5% of parents who were not abused as children—this is the biggest factor relating parents to child abuse.)

**Single parent** (any parent can become overly stressed with parenting—being able to turn the situation over to the other parent can literally be a lifesaver)

**Spouse** is gone much of the time (has the same effect as a single parent)

**Divorce** (the stress of the divorce alone, single parenting, financial problems, etc.)

**Alcohol or other drugs**

**Low self-esteem** (parent does not feel capable of parenting)

**Isolation** (lives away from family, neighbors, or friends who could provide help with frustrations and some of the responsibilities of parenting).

Other parent that is uninvolved and critical (always telling the other parent to "shut those kids up")

**Emotional immaturity**

**Postpartum depression**

**Unrealistic expectations** (does not realize that a child cannot be toilet trained by 12 months, that children are normally messy, that two- year-olds say no just because they are two-year-olds)

**Stress of unemployment** (when unemployment rates go up, child abuse rates also go up)

**Financial stress** (25% of those with insufficient incomes abuse their children in some way—48% are neglectful)

Other stresses of any kind

Mental illness (while many think this must surely be the case of people who would abuse children, this category accounts for 10-25% of child abusers)

Often we can remove the **stress** from the equation with some thought and some effort:

1. A parent might get a sitter or ask assistance from friends or relatives if he/she is a single parent or has a spouse that is gone much of the time. This will alleviate the stress of being the only one to care for the child and allow some time to relax and restore enough energy to deal with a child. An option available in most communities is the family support center.
2. Take child development classes or read books on the subject to help understand the normal development of a child and what can be expected at each stage.
3. Find a job or sell some assets to alleviate financial stress or the stress of unemployment.
4. If the parent was an abused child, seek help and make specific plans as to how he/she will parent without the use of abusive action.

**ABUSED PARENTS CAN BECOME NON-ABUSIVE PARENTS IF:**

1. They had one loving and supportive parent or foster parent.
2. They have positive relationships with their spouses.
3. They have fewer stressful life events.
4. They are aware that their childhood treatment was abusive, resolve not to repeat it, and actively pursue alternative non-abusive child guidance methods.

It is almost a guarantee that every one of you who become parents will come to a point in your parenting where you will have the urge in some way to abuse your child. While this may seem impossible to you now, every parent meets their **coping threshold** from time to time. If we look at the abuse equation, we can discover how to prevent abuse in our own homes.

**1. Remove the stress.**

In the story of the spilled milk we could remove the stress by removing the glass of milk or by putting the milk in a spill-proof child's cup (now widely used by parents with less stress). The mother could have removed the glass from the reach of the child and assisted the child with drinking from the large unmanageable glass.

**2. Remove the caregiver or the child.**

If a parent feels that he/she has reached his/her coping threshold he/she might get someone else to watch the child for a period of time until he/she can cool off and regain control, thus removing the caregiver and the child from a situation that could become violent or abusive.

It is not always possible to get someone to come to your home and give you a rest when a child gets unbearable. It is always wise to have a plan of action for such times. The following example may be helpful. After checking the child to see that he/she is dry and not in pain or discomfort for some reason, put the child in a crib, being sure the child cannot get out and that there is nothing he/she can hurt him/herself with. Then leave the room for a brief period of time to allow yourself to cool down and regain control of your own emotions. If necessary, check back on the child and then leave again until you feel calm and able to deal with the child. Remember, children cannot really hurt themselves by just crying and sometimes they have pent-up emotions that need to be released just as adults do. Crying may be their way of relieving these emotions.

If a sitter is the caregiver, it is wise for a parent to make certain the sitter has options if the child becomes too much for him/her. Make sure there is a number where you can be reached or a number where the sitter can reach a grandparent if the stress level gets too high. For assistance, refer the sitter to a neighbor that you have made arrangements with to help in times of need. The parent(s) should call home from time to time, especially if he/she will be gone for long, and see how things are at home. It is relatively easy to detect the stress in the voice of a sitter if things are getting unbearable. Remember that it is especially unnerving to listen to a young child cry for extended periods and a sitter should not be left to deal with that type of situation.