

# CONNECTING

Healthy Information from the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center  May/June 2005

## The Impact of Abuse on a Child's Development

With local and national media focusing attention on recent devastating incidents of child abuse, you might be wondering, "How will such abuse affect that child?" An estimated 13,000 children were abused in the state of Iowa in 2003. This figure includes only those maltreated children who were actually reported to child protection agencies. There are thousands more incidents that go unreported.

Abuse of children can take several forms: physical abuse (burns, bruises, fractures, injuries that cannot be explained), sexual abuse (sexual acts, indecent exposure, sexual exploitation), denial of critical care/neglect (failure to provide food/nutrition, shelter, clothing, health and mental health care, supervision), and emotional abuse (isolation, rejection, terrorizing with continual verbal assaults). Child abuse in any form traumatizes the victim at a neural level, assaulting the brain and nervous system, resulting in altered neurological/brain function. It is important to remember that this damage is responsive to psychotherapeutic treatment and the child is capable of healing from the trauma of abuse when treated.

The immediate consequences of child abuse are seen in the onset of aberrant behaviors. In attempting to predict a particular child's reaction to abuse, there are no absolutes. Most children will show some signs of strain within a few days of the abuse. Some children will come away seemingly unscathed, possibly for years. Still other children will exhibit a delayed response to abuse. I will be outlining a wide range of possible reactions. Most abused children exhibit one or more of the following reactions.

Some children respond in an anxious/fearful manner:

- Children may have traumatic fear. Their fear that the abuse will happen again is so overpowering that their emotions return to the state of terror they experienced during the abuse.
- The anxiety can be pervasive, with the child being "on guard," overly cautious and anxious regarding everyday activities and situations.
- The anxiety also might be specifically related to some aspect of the abusive situation. For example, the child might be fearful of cigarettes if they were burned, or a cologne scent if the perpetrator wore cologne/aftershave.
- At times children might panic when a sensory experience (e.g., smell, visual experience, taste, skin sensation, sound) triggers a memory or flashback. A panic reaction by a child can be screaming, yelling, thrashing, or difficulty breathing.
- Separation anxiety can occur, ranging from mild difficulty separating for school to severe clingy behavior and following the caregiver around the house. These children seem to need extra assurance that their safety needs are being met at all times.
- Children also can seem hypervigilant with a nervous, startle response to even subtle sounds or changes in the environment, making it difficult for the child to pay attention, learn, or enjoy activities.
- Children experiencing anxiety reactions also might have difficulty going to sleep, difficulty staying asleep, and/or disturbing dreams.

Some children respond to abuse with sad and depressed feelings.

- Abused children might withdraw from interactions with others. Social interactions could become too threatening and not feel safe, possibly creating emotional experiences that trigger bad feelings.
- Children might lose interest in activities that they used to enjoy. After the abuse, safety becomes such a concern that they lose the energy and spirit needed to enjoy these pleasurable activities.
- Some children begin to struggle with their self-esteem due to feeling helpless, unworthy, "dirty," or responsible for the horrible acts perpetrated upon them.

One way that children typically cope with stressful situations is to have a temporary setback in age-appropriate skills and behaviors. The unmanageable stress caused by the abuse creates a marked regression in many children.

- They might become excessively whiny or fussy, lose the ability to comfort themselves and/or to control their aggression, anger, and frustration.
- They might become rageful when exposed to significant triggers, such as anticipating a visit with an abusive caregiver.
- Temporary, infrequent daytime and bedtime wetting accidents are not uncommon when a child has been abused.
- Other areas of regression may include thumb sucking to provide extra comfort, limited tolerance for frustration, inattentiveness, or diminished expressive language skills (e.g., "baby talk").
- Children who have been neglected can have severe language and cognitive delay.
- Neglected children might also hoard or become overly focused on food due to this basic need not having been met.

Sometimes children exhibit fears and concerns about the abuse through complaints about bodily aches and pains and/or overreacting to minor cuts and scrapes. Young children, in particular, have an easier time identifying and discussing bodily hurts rather than emotional hurts. Their somatic complaints are a way for them to communicate, "I am hurting."

Children might seem to exhibit some personality changes after being abused.

- Abused children may focus more on themselves than was typical prior to the abuse. Healing emotional and sometimes physical wounds requires a lot of emotional energy, and therefore they might become self-absorbed.
- Often children who have been abused lose trust in others, making statements such as, "You can't count on others."
- They begin to recognize how vulnerable they are and fear the loss of control over their bodies and emotions.
- They might seem more angry and hostile.
- Of serious concern are children who turn their anger and rage toward themselves and engage in self-injury (e.g., cutting, burning) and suicidal thoughts or attempts.

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continued from page 1 . . .

- Also, some children dissociate. When children seem “absent” for a period of time and have no recollection of what they were doing or thinking, they might be dissociating. Dissociation allows the child to escape from hurtful emotions and fears and is more common with longstanding and repeated abuse.
- Additionally, children who have been sexually abused might exhibit an over-focus on sexual behaviors and/or engage in age-inappropriate sexual behaviors.

Although many of these behavioral and emotional reactions can occur at any time from infancy through adolescence (e.g., sleep disturbance, regression, withdrawal, fears), there are some developmental differences to consider as well. From infancy to 2.5 years old, children can become hyper-vigilant to noises, freeze their bodies, seem excessively fussy, and fear separation from the caregiver. From 2.5 years to 6 years, children begin repeatedly retelling the event, exhibiting play of traumatic events, expressing bodily complaints, and having intrusive visual images of the abuse. At 6 years through 11 years old, decreased concentration and increased distractibility begin interfering with schoolwork. School-age children might feel responsible for the abuse, be acutely aware of parental reactions, and feel overwhelmed by the intensity of their feelings. During pre-teen and adolescence, an abused youth might exhibit risk-taking behaviors, wish for revenge on the perpetrator, and experience depression and pessimistic thinking patterns.

Although each child responds in a unique way to his/her abusive situation, abuse is always a traumatic experience and can have serious and long-term negative impact on a child. It is critical that we identify child victims of abuse and follow-up with appropriate interventions and treatment to help these children work through the emotional and behavioral issues resulting from abuse.

#### **Kelli Hill Hunt, Ph.D.**

*Kelli Hill Hunt is a clinical child psychologist. She holds a doctoral degree in clinical psychology with a specialty in child and family from Wayne State University. Kelli provides therapy to toddlers through adolescents, as well as parents and families. She has a special interest in psychological assessment, depression, anxiety, and behavior problems.*

#### **Resources**

Allen, Jon G. (2001). *Traumatic Relationships and Serious Mental Disorders*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Brooks, B. & Siegel, P. (1996). *The Scared Child: Helping Kids Overcome Traumatic Events*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Iowa Department of Human Services, [www.dhs.state.ia.us/dhs2005/dhs\\_homepage/docs/CY2003\\_Child\\_Abuse\\_Data1.xls](http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/dhs2005/dhs_homepage/docs/CY2003_Child_Abuse_Data1.xls)

Monahan, C. (1993). *Children and Trauma: A Guide for Parents and Professionals*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Solomon, M. & Siegel, D. (2003). *Healing Trauma: attachment, mind, body, and brain*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

## **C.O.O.L. Corner**

Children Overcoming the Obstacles of Life

### **Hot Fun in the Summertime!**

- ▶ Fruit and a little water/ice in a blender, paper cups, and Popsicle sticks make a COOL treat.
- ▶ A garden hose, a kiddie pool, old cottage cheese cartons, and turkey basters make for some COOL fun.
- ▶ A hammock or blanket in the shade, graham crackers and raisins in a baggie, and a good book make for some COOL rest.
- ▶ Taking a walk looking for treasures with my mom and/or dad makes a COOL me!



MANifest is a program for men facilitated by male counselors, built around weekend retreats and Saturday workshops. MANifest is for men of all ages and from every walk of life.

Lowell Houts, D.Min., and Mike Sears, Ed.D., facilitate all MANifest programs.

MANifest Saturday morning breakfast group is open to all MANifest alumni. The group meets monthly from 8:30 – 10:00 a.m. in the first floor conference room at Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center, 550 39th Street in Des Moines. Upcoming meeting dates are: May 14, June 11, July 9, and August 13.

The next MANifest event will be a workshop on *Men and Their Fathers*, scheduled for Saturday, August 6, 2005, 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. Mark your calendars now! Please register by calling the Center, 274-4006.

Questions about MANifest?? Call Lowell Houts or Mike Sears at the Center, 274-4006.

## **The Center helps real people with real needs.**

About 1/3 of the people seen at the Center are children. Children like Allie and Pat.

*Allie and Pat are adjusting to living with their maternal grandparents after being removed from the care of their mother for the third time in four years. Their mother has a substance abuse problem and their stepdad is incarcerated for molesting them. During counseling, they told their secrets through puppet play while “hiding” in a teepee. They depicted their hurts, fears, and rage with paints on large pieces of paper. Today, Allie and Pat are doing much better. Their nightmares have ceased and their appetites have improved. They are making progress at school. They get to see their mother for supervised visits and they are okay with this. They continue to come to C.O.O.L., the Center’s department for children and adolescents. This year holds hope for Allie, Pat, and many other children, thanks to the generosity of people like you.*

You can make a real difference in the lives of individuals and families who are struggling with the challenges of life. By supporting the work of the Center with a contribution today, you are making a gift well worth giving.

## Women Helping Women 2005

### *In Our Choices, We Create*

*“... We are here because we know that we need women, every woman, whole and strong in the world. We are here because we know we need the work of women’s bodies and the power of women’s spirits in the world. We are here because we have made a choice to create a world where the voices and imagination and wisdom of women are acknowledged, regarded, and needed as much as they have ever been needed in any hour of our history. What other choices will we make as women in this day, in this hour?”*

*~ Carmen Lampe Zeitler*



The gathering of 210 women and men at the Center’s 7th annual Women Helping Women luncheon on March 11th was galvanized by the inspiring words of honored guest, Carmen Lampe Zeitler, executive director of Children and Families Urban Ministries. Carmen shared poignant story after story about women “of use,” women who “jumped into work head first, moved things forward, did what had to be done again and again, moved in a common rhythm, knew work that was real.” From her grandmother to our daughters, there is always this hour... a time when women gather, when choices get made, when a future is created. The entire text of her presentation can be downloaded from the Center’s website <http://www.dmpcc.org/newsletter/choices.pdf>.

We are incredibly grateful for the generous support of Women Helping Women by our underwriters: Compressor Control Corporation, Des Moines University, The Lagniappe, Family Communication Associates, The Vicky Daniel Real Estate Team, Sahar’s; and our sponsors: Joseph’s Jewelry Stores, Kemin Industries, West Bank. Bouquets to the event volunteer committee: Miriam Davis, Starr Hinrichs, Mary Kramer, and Kathi Slaughter. And many thanks to the women who have made one significant choice already: their donation to support the Center’s work with women and girls who cannot afford the cost of counseling.

Please continue to help the Center in this meaningful work by sending in your contribution to the Women Helping Women Fund. Access to quality, affordable counseling at critical moments in the lives of women and girls can mean survival.



# Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center FOUNDATION

The Center's Foundation welcomed a new member at its April meeting, Sandra Axness, retired, Des Moines Public Schools. Sandy was introduced by longtime Foundation member, Margaret Swanson, who has known her as an active neighborhood and community volunteer.

One of the Foundation board members made the following testimonial during the meeting that he wanted to share with each of you.

*"I came to realize that it is as easy for my heirs to spend 100% of my 'estate' as to spend 90% of it. That is when the real fun began, deciding how I wanted to leave my mark on my community. There are a number of organizations whose work in the community I have cared about over the years. One of those has been the Center.*

*I have seen the Center provide hope and healing to thousands and thousands of clients during my tenure on the Foundation board. I have heard many case stories of lives turned around, relationships restored, futures revitalized. I knew my annual gift was important and wanted it to*

*continue to be there after I was gone. I'm not particularly wealthy and I don't have a large estate, but I have put the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center Foundation in my will."*

Won't you join him? Your bequest or deferred gift of any size works with the gifts of many donors to make a real difference in individual lives long after you are gone.

*"To leave the world a little better – whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived... This is the meaning of success."  
~ Ralph Waldo Emerson*

## We welcome your feedback!

Please address your comments and suggestions about this newsletter to: Kathleen Murrin ~ DMPCC ~ 550 39th St., #100 ~ Des Moines, IA 50312 ~ (515) 274-4006 ~ newsletter@dmpcc.org

[www.dmpcc.org](http://www.dmpcc.org)

Visit the Center's website for more information on the Center's counseling services and staff, special events and classes.

## CONNECTING

is a publication of the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center, an independent, interfaith, not-for-profit organization. For over 30 years, the Center has been providing counseling and educational services to adults, families, adolescents, and children for the purpose of enhancing emotional, spiritual, and relationship health. The Center has satellite offices in West Des Moines, Altoona, Ankeny, and Urbandale.  
Editor: Kathleen Murrin

### Inside this issue: *The Impact of Abuse on a Child*

The Impact of Abuse on a Child's Development .....	page 1
C.O.O.L. Corner .....	page 2
MANifest .....	page 2
The Center helps real people with real needs .....	page 2
Women Helping Women .....	page 3
Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center Foundation .....	page 4



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