

FAMILY DYNAMICS IN CHILD MALTREATMENT

The Parent's Predisposition to Maltreat His/Her Child

Research indicates that a high percentage of parents who maltreat their children can relate and describe a *history of abuse or neglect in their own lives*. This can create a predisposition to maltreat one's own children, for the following reasons.

- The parent has *low self-esteem*, feels unloved, uncared for, somehow bad, the "black sheep" of the family, unworthy, abandoned, and depressed.
- The parent cannot trust or depend upon other people to meet his/her needs to care about him/her. He/she expects rejection and pain in relationships. He/she often isolates him/herself to avoid further pain.
- Abusive and neglectful parents are often *preoccupied* with trying to find ways to get their own needs met. Turning to their children to meet their needs creates the classic "*role reversal*", in which the child assumes adult behaviors which nurture the parent. Neglectful parents may engage in impulsive or selfish behaviors, which can be explained as a similar lack of empathy for the needs of the child and a preoccupation with themselves and meeting their own needs.
- The abusive parent looks to the *child to validate the parent's self-esteem*. Abusive parents imbue their children with the power to measure the parent's worth. In the parent's mind, if the child appears grateful for the parent's care, is happy, pleasant to be around, and responsive, this confirms that the parent is a "good parent" and the child "loves him". If the child is unresponsive, oppositional, or unhappy, the parent often interprets this as a devastating personal failure and rejection.

- The parent's lack of trust contributes to *conflict and inconsistency in interpersonal relationships*. Because of this conflict, sources of support and help which might otherwise be available are not. The parent is extremely *vulnerable to being hurt* by other people. They expect to be attacked.

- Many abusive parents have *poor emotional control*. They may carry a residue of anger from childhood. With low frustration tolerance and deep feelings of insecurity, they experience even minor events as major assaults to an already fragile self-esteem, and at times, their rage may become uncontrollable and be expressed in violent behavior against the child.

- They appear to *fear authority*, yet behave authoritatively. This may be as an attempt to assume and retain control in an "uncontrollable" world.

- Both abusive and neglectful parents may exhibit a pervasive *lack of empathy and understanding* of their children. Caretaking is often performed mechanically and at the parent's convenience, without any warmth, sensitivity, and empathetic action in response to the perceived needs of the child.

In situations of abuse, the parent's inability to empathize is exhibited in *distorted and unrealistic expectations for children's behavior*. Abusive parents tend to see a normal child's dependence, rebelliousness, distress, and autonomy as direct evidence of their inability to parent, or confirmation that their child does not really care about them.

In situations of neglect, especially where the parent is apathetic and emotionally void or distant, the parent appears not to have the ability to provide emotional nurturance, and is largely unaware that the child needs such nurturance and attention.

- ❑ Some parents who have been raised with violence make the assumption that violence is "natural". Violent attention is construed as attention, which is preferred to indifference.
- ❑ Both abuse and neglect may occur in families in which parents are mentally ill, mentally retarded, or emotionally disturbed. However, the percentage of abusive or neglectful parents with disorders of this type is relatively small. The psychotic parent's lack of contact with reality, pervasive thought disorder, hallucinations, and delusions creates very abnormal parenting.
- ❑ Mentally retarded parents may have very little knowledge of proper parenting methods, poor skills, and very limited judgment. As a result of their deficits in both cognitive and social skills, parents who are mentally retarded may both abuse and neglect their children.

The Child is Seen as "Different" or "Unworthy"

Children are more prone to abuse if they cannot meet the abusive parent's expectations for "good" or "right" behavior. Although the characteristics that make the child "good" or "different" are often in the eyes of the beholder, certain characteristics place children at higher risk.

- ❑ Some children are more *difficult to care for* due to personality traits and temperament. Being stubborn, rebellious, extremely energetic, easily distressed or temperamental, distractible, withdrawn and self-absorbed, or challenging places a child at a greater risk of being abused.
- ❑ Children who are hyperactive, mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, developmentally disabled, premature, or have chronic illnesses or medical conditions, are at higher risk. These conditions may reinforce the parent's belief that the *child is somehow "defective"* or less than adequate.
- ❑ It is typical to find children in a family treated differently, with one child the target of most of the abuse.

- In situations of neglect, the quality of care provided to all the children is more consistent. It is less likely that a neglectful parent will selectively provide a high quality of care for some of his/her children and neglect others.
- Children are at *higher risk of maltreatment during certain developmental periods*, particularly infancy. Infants require constant care and attention to meet even their most basic needs. Therefore, they are easily neglected by parents who provide marginal care. The stress experienced by an abusive parent may erupt in violence against the child.
- Toilet training can create power struggles and conflicts, particularly when the child is stubborn, oppositional, and fails to comply with the parent's toileting demands. Many abusive parents view toileting accidents or autonomy on the child's part as "willful" noncompliance, or "doing it just to spite me." Inflicted injuries to the genitals and dunking burns on the buttocks in toddlers are commonly punishment for toileting accidents.

Stress and Crisis in the Family

In situations of chronic abuse, there may be long periods of time between abusive events. The precipitation of an abusive event is often related to excessive stress or a family crisis. Abusive parents are more vulnerable to emotional stress, resulting in a high level of frustration and self-criticism which often "trigger" abuse.

There is a high correlation between situational stress, lack of coping resources, and neglect of children.

The Absence of Supports

The parent's inability to trust other people, the expectation of attack and criticism, and a sense of shame about perceived failures together lead to

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"*self-imposed isolation*," which is an unwillingness to reach out to other people for help. This may be exhibited both in fear of other people, or in an attitude that "This is nobody's business". We handle our own problems in this family." This isolation prevents families from accessing needed sources of support to help in coping with stress situations.

Reference: Brandt Steele, "Psychodynamic Factors in Child Abuse," in Helfer, Ray E. and Kempe, Ruth S. (eds) The Battered Child, Fourth Edition, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987.