

# Parental and Family Conditions of Abuse

## The Parent's Predisposition to Maltreat His/Her Children

Research indicates that a high percentage of parents that abuse and neglect their children have a history of abuse or neglect in their own lives. However, this fact is not always immediately evident when one talks to abusing or neglectful parents. Brandt Steele, in his book *Psychodynamic Factors in Child Abuse*, suggests several reasons for this:

- Some parents do not consider their experiences to have been abuse, even when there were obvious physical injuries. They perceived their parents as providing appropriate punishment or discipline for misbehavior. Many feel they got what they deserved, i.e., they were so bad they deserved the punishment, and therefore, it was not abuse.
- They may have learned early in life, that to criticize or complain about their parents' actions led to further maltreatment. Many continue to feel threatened by their own parents, even as adults.
- Some might deny they were maltreated and maintain, instead, a fantasy that their parents were really good to them in order to maintain a positive view of themselves, their parents, and their childhood. Their parents may, in fact, relate better to them as adults. Thus, the memories that are painful are not immediately relevant, so there is a natural tendency to suppress or distort them.
- The emotional pain may be so great that parents actually do not remember being maltreated.
- Neglect is an absence of proper treatment. An adult neglected as a child may have nothing with which to compare his/her experience. His/her descriptions about his/her early years may be vague, such as "I was alone a lot", or "nobody seemed to care about me". Few are able to acknowledge "Yes, I was neglected".
- Being abused and neglected as a child can leave permanent developmental scars.
- The parent often has low self-esteem, feels unloved, uncared for, somehow bad, unworthy, abandoned, and depressed.
- The parent is often unable to trust or depend upon the world and other people to meet his/her needs, to care about him/her. He/she may expect rejection and pain in relationships. He/she may isolate him/herself to avoid further pain.

## Parental and Family Conditions of Abuse (continued)

- Abusive and neglectful parents are often preoccupied with trying to find ways to get their own needs met. With limited resources to meet their own emotional needs and unable to get other people to meet them, abusive parents often turn to their children.
- Many abused children were wanted children. The abusive parent often believes that by having the child and caring for it, there will be at least one person in the world who will love them. By reinforcing the child's nurturing behaviors toward the parent, the classic role reversal develops.
- Neglectful parents may leave their child unattended while they go out and engage in activities that feel good to them at the moment, without consideration of the long-term consequences. They may spend their money to buy things for themselves while their child goes hungry; or they may leave the child with a neighbor while they drive across the country with a boyfriend. The impulsive, selfish behavior of many neglectful parents can be explained as a similar lack of empathy for the needs of the child and a preoccupation with themselves and with meeting their own needs.
- The abusive parent may look to the child to validate her/his self-esteem. Children of abusive parents are imbued by their parents 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 them". If the child is unresponsive, oppositional, or unhappy, the abusive parent often interprets this as rejection or a devastating personal failure.
- The parent's inability to trust contributes to conflict and inconsistency in interpersonal relationships. Because of this conflict, sources of support and help, that might otherwise be available, are not. Additionally, the combination of emotional dependence and an inability to trust creates anxiety and ambivalence about relationships, and 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, which was never expressed because of fear of further maltreatment. With low frustration tolerance and deep feelings of insecurity, they experience even minor events as major assaults to an already fragile self-esteem. When their own feelings of inadequacy are surfaced and reinforced during parenting activities, the rage may become uncontrollable and be expressed in violent behavior against the child.
- They appear to fear authority, yet behave authoritatively. This may be seen as an attempt to assume and retain control in an "uncontrollable" world.

## Parental and Family Conditions of Abuse (continued)

- Both abusive and neglectful parents may exhibit a pervasive lack of empathy and understanding toward their children. Care giving is often performed mechanically and at the parent's convenience, without any warmth, sensitivity, or 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 when 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". For example, a young mother said of her boyfriend, "he wouldn't bother to hit me unless he liked me". Violent attention is still attention, which is preferred to indifference.
- Both abuse and neglect may occur in families in which parents have mental health diagnosis or are developmentally delayed. However, the percentage of abusive or neglectful parents with disorders of this type is relatively small. The parent diagnosed with psychosis may have a lack of contact with reality, pervasive thought disorder, hallucinations, and delusions that create very abnormal parenting. A parent diagnosed with psychosis might, as an example, withdraw and ignore the children for long periods of time, or may suffer from paranoid delusions and "punish" the child for imagined misdeeds.
- Parents with pervasive developmental disabilities may have very little knowledge of proper parenting methods, poor skills, and very limited judgment. As a result of their impairments in both cognitive and social skills, parents who are diagnosed with mental retardation may potentially abuse and neglect their children. These parents may need supportive re-education and continual monitoring in order to learn and maintain proper methods of child management and care.

## Parental and Family Conditions of Abuse (continued)

### The Child Is Seen as "Different" or "Unworthy"

According to Steele, one dynamic that contributes to abuse is the parent's perception of the child as somehow different or unworthy. The parent has the conviction or belief that a child's primary role is to behave and respond in such a way as to please and satisfy parents. Therefore, children who "fail" to perform adequately are therefore unsatisfactory and are either worthless or need to be punished to make them "shape up."

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

- Some children are more difficult to care for due to personality and temperament. Being stubborn, rebellious, extremely energetic, easily distressed, temperamental, distractible, withdrawn and self-absorbed, or challenging puts a child at a greater risk of being abused.
- Children are at higher risk of abuse and of neglect if they are hyperactive, are diagnosed with pervasive developmental delay, premature, or have chronic illnesses or medical conditions. These children often need continuous care, which places excessive demands on the parent. An illness or condition that requires hospitalization or some type of special care reinforces the parent's belief that the child is somehow "defective" or less than adequate.
- While it is possible for all children within a family to be abused, it is typical to find one particular child the target of most of the abuse.

In situations of neglect, the quality of care provided by the parents 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 their children and neglect others.

- Children are at higher risk of maltreatment during certain developmental periods. Infants require constant care and attention to meet even their most basic needs. They are, therefore, predisposed to neglect by parents who provide marginal care. Infants, at times, cry continuously for no apparent reason and cannot be comforted. This can try the patience of even the most tolerant parent. 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 common patterns of abuse inflicted for toileting accidents.

## **Parental and Family Conditions of Abuse (continued)**

### **Stress and Crisis in the Family**

The precipitation of an abusive event is often related to excessive stress or family crisis. The parent may have difficulty dealing with stress due to poor coping skills, and low self-esteem. Such problems often leave people more vulnerable to emotional stress. An abusive parent's reaction to stress is often characterized by frustration and self-criticism. Unmanageable stress is, therefore, often the "trigger" that precipitates an abusive event.

Abuse may occur in families where there has been no previous maltreatment during times of severe situational stress. The stress does not cause abuse, but increases the likelihood that it will occur in situations where the parents are predisposed to be abusive. These "acute" abusive incidents are often related to major life changes, including death, divorce, loss of employment, or illness.

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

### **The Absence of Supports**

- An inability to trust other people, the expectation of attack and criticism and a sense of shame about perceived failures often lead to one's self-imposed isolation. This may become manifest by an unwillingness or inability to reach out to other people for help, fear of other people, or an attitude that this is nobody's business. "We handle our own problems in this family." This isolation prevents families from accessing support when needed to help in coping with stress situations.
- Some cultures hold a value that personal problems should not be discussed with or revealed to people outside the immediate or extended family. These families, however, often have excellent support systems within their families or immediate communities. While they may choose not to access help from strangers or formal community agencies, their informal support networks are very strong.
- The worker must be cautious in interpreting a family's unwillingness to use formal agency support systems as self-imposed isolation. The diagnostic clue in abusive families is that they lack supports even within their families and communities, their interpersonal relationships are often filled with conflict and they exhibit distrust and a lack of confidence in anyone.

## Parental and Family Conditions of Abuse (continued)

### Assignment:

1. Teach the class the knowledge they need to understand this condition.
2. Provide a case example including the culture of the family, the signs of the condition and how the condition is contributing to the safety and well-being of the child.
3. Be creative in your presentation; it may be as interactive as you choose. You have 15 minutes to prepare your presentation and it may only be 5 to 7 minutes in length.
4. Use the content of the handout as part of your presentation.

### Reference:

Steele, B. F., M. E. Helfer, R. S. Kempe, & R. D. Krugman (Eds.), *Psychodynamic and biological factors in child maltreatment: The battered child* (5th ed.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

