

Preventing Child Abuse:
A Nationwide Responsibility
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“We owe our children - the most vulnerable citizens in any society - a life free from violence and fear” (Fairholm & Singh, 2010). When Nelson Mandela spoke those words, he was voicing what should be an unconditional truth in all free societies - that every child has the right to be free from any form of abuse and oppression. However, even in democratic, developed nations such as Canada, this has yet to be the truth. $\frac{1}{3}$ of Canadians have been subject to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse as children, which can have tragic long-term consequences for the victims (Boesveld, 2014). The prevention of child abuse is not just a private matter concerning the individuals involved in each case; it is a nationwide responsibility that requires every member of the community to be actively involved and educated in protecting the safety of society’s most vulnerable members. In order to contribute to the prevention of child abuse, communities must be prepared to provide education for impressionable children, resources for vulnerable families, and knowledge for community members to be able to recognize the signs of abuse.

The first step in preventing child abuse is ensuring that the most vulnerable victims are aware of how to protect themselves. Children must first be taught safe boundaries and how to recognize when they are being mistreated. Children are, by nature, vulnerable and completely dependent on adults to take care of them. This may be the unfortunate reason that they are victimized, as the perpetrator knows that children are less likely to be able to defend themselves and report abuse. Parents and educators must be prepared to display a high degree of honesty and openness with children. This ensures that children are educated on how to avoid situations of abuse and how to protect themselves if they find themselves in an abusive scenario. Children are often taught to trust authority figures, such as teachers, police officers, friends, and family members. However, while it is important that children continue to feel safe and trusting in the presence of adults, it is also important that children are taught not to blindly follow the instructions of someone

just because they are a grownup. Putting safety mechanisms in place, such as establishing a code word to prevent children from accompanying adults who claim to know their parents, is one strategy that can help children protect themselves from abusive situations. In cases that abuse does occur, children need to know that they are not to blame and how and where to report it. Feelings of guilt and shame often follow children who have been victims of abuse, and so it is instrumental that children are shown beforehand that there are safe spaces and trustworthy people to whom they can go to. In ideal situations, children would first turn to their parents to report abuse. However, this is not always possible. It is a sad truth that most child abuse occurs within families or in the home. In Canada, 8 out of 10 of police-reported violent crimes against children are committed by someone they knew, and ¼ are committed by a family member, including parents and siblings (Sinha, 2015). In these cases, children should be aware of local resources that they can turn to, such as teachers, doctors, the police, or even friends and other family members.

The second step in preventing child abuse is providing resources for families most at-risk for child maltreatment. For parents who are at-risk to be guilty of child abuse, community resources must be available to ensure they are aware of how to best protect their children. Children who grow up in families where there is a history of intergenerational abuse are more likely to be abused than children who did not grow up in families with an abusive history (Merrick & Guinn, 2018). This may be because the children's parents are themselves unaware of how to healthily parent their children because of their own abusive childhoods. Research has shown that victims of child abuse are more likely to develop depressive symptoms and substance abuse, which are both linked to increased child abuse perpetration (2018). To protect children from being abused in the home, parents must first be educated on how to foster a safe, healthy, and stable environment within their households. Community workshops on parenting can be helpful for vulnerable parents

who are unsure of how to establish a safe and nurturing relationship with their children. Not only does this contribute to the prevention of child abuse, but it can also break the intergenerational pattern of abuse within families. Governments must also be prepared to provide aid for children in low-income families who are most at-risk for abuse. Research has found that families that face economic hardship in Canada face an increase in substantiated child maltreatment by a factor of 1.91 (Lefebvre, Fallon, Van Wert & Filipelli, 2017). Parents who face economic hardship encounter heightened levels of stress. This can lead to financially stressed parents being less present in the home because they are busy working, which can lead to an increased risk of neglect, a prevalent form of child maltreatment. Providing social welfare programs for low-income families can decrease the risk of child abuse. A study found that increasing minimum wage by \$1 led to significantly fewer reports of child abuse (2017). While it may not be possible for all provinces to increase minimum wage, it is possible for provincial governments and federal institutions to establish increased social assistance and welfare programs that can help lessen the financial burden on low-income families. This contributes to the prevention of child abuse by providing support for at-risk members of the community.

Finally, public employees and community members must be educated in how to recognize and treat the signs of child abuse. Individuals who are actively involved in children's lives must be educated on how to recognize the signs of abuse. Teachers are among the only adults other than family members who are engaged in a child's life when they are young. Similarly to how teachers spend professional activity (P.A.) days learning how to better themselves as teachers, they should also have workshops on how to recognize and treat signs of child abuse. Some forms of abuse are easier to pick out. Teachers should be taught to ask a child how they may have gotten an injury, and if the injury is unexplained or the explanation does not sound valid, they should know which

next steps should be taken to further investigate the issue. But other forms of abuse are not as obvious. Emotional and verbal abuse can rear its head in different ways, and teachers should also learn how to recognize these signs. If a child is acting uncharacteristically or inappropriately, they should know which signs lead to abuse. The same thing goes for doctors, who can better assess how a child got injured or the reasons a child is acting strangely. Teachers, doctors, and other people actively involved in a child's life should establish trusting and safe relationships with the child so that, should signs emerge that they are being abused, the child can feel safe relaying that information to them. However, even if an individual is not involved in a child's life, they should still be educated on how to recognize the signs of abuse. Public prevention programs should be provided so that all members of the community are aware of how to deal with child abuse. Some people may be hesitant to report to the police if they witness what they believe to be an abusive scenario in a public area because they are worried it will be a false report. But "better safe than sorry" is the saying, and it is especially true in situations involving something as serious as child abuse. By educating members of the community on how to recognize and report child abuse, it contributes to the prevention of more children being abused by ensuring that all people are aware of how prevalent of an issue it is and why it needs to be stopped.

Child abuse is a tragic issue with detrimental consequences for both the victims and society as a whole. It is vital that children are taught how to protect themselves from perpetrators, and are provided with the necessary education to feel safe and comfortable when reporting abuse. Community programs and social support has to be provided to combat the cycle of intergenerational abuse and negligence that can follow at-risk families. All members of the community must be educated on how to recognize and report child abuse, and be imbued with the

understanding that protecting children from abuse is a societal responsibility. After all, children are the future, and it is in everyone's best interest to protect that future.

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