Families at Risk

Child abuse and neglect are most likely to occur when a combination of stressors affect an individual or family. These stressors may reinforce each other. Such stress can result in child abuse if parents or other caregivers are not able to get help in solving their problems.

Factors sometimes associated with child abuse include:

- Overwhelming stress
- Low self-esteem in adults
- A history of some type of abuse or neglect in the abuser's own adult or childhood background
- Lack of a support system among relatives and friends
- Little knowledge of child development and child rearing skills
- Unfulfilled emotional needs
- Severe marital, financial, housing or health problems that sap energy and emotional strength
- Belief that physical punishment of children (slapping and spanking) is an appropriate discipline method
- Frustration created by infants or children with special needs or children who are sick or cry often
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Lack of empathy

Recognizing factors that lead to abuse is the first step in breaking the child abuse cycle. The next is seeking appropriate help.

Help is Available

Parents can learn new parenting skills, help their children mind, and enjoy their children more. They can ask for help with other problems that cause individual and family stress.

Start at Home

Remember children are fragile; handle them with care. Caring for children is one of the toughest jobs around. When tension starts to build, when you are tempted to hit a child or start yelling, back off. Take some deep breaths; count to 20; or do as many push-ups or sit-ups as you can imagine. Talk with a friend or another parent. If no one is around to talk to, call a crisis hotline number for help.

Sometimes frustrated adults will vigorously shake a child instead of hitting. They may think that shaking a child is a safe way of venting anger or enforcing discipline. DON'T DO IT. Shaking a child can cause serious brain damage, even death. It is particularly risky with children less than one year old. Use discipline methods that aren't violent. Send a child to bed or turn off the TV. Use calm communication or "time-out" to enforce discipline. Take into account the age of the child being disciplined.

Make Time for Your Children

Give your children a hug and a smile, a word or two of encouragement and some of your time each day. Increase the amount of positive attention given to your children. Pay more attention to what your children do right than what they do wrong. Positive attention increases good behavior! Praise your children for following instructions, putting away toys or brushing their teeth. Give your children easy jobs they can do well. Let them win. Help make them proud of themselves.
Child abuse and neglect can result in loss of life or mental development of the child. Injuries to the ears, arms and legs. These injuries may result in mental retardation, blindness, deafness, or loss of a limb. Abused children have difficulty loving and trusting other people. They may have low self-esteem. Abused children often have higher levels of aggression, anxiety, impulsive reactions and self-destructiveness. They may run away or have difficulty at school. As teenagers or adults, they may

Because child abuse causes such serious problems, it is important to recognize factors influencing abusive behavior.

Abuse can be replaced with understanding. Parents can learn better ways to handle their children. The titles of other Nevada Cooperative Extension fact sheets that deal with child abuse and stress are:

- Recognizing Child Abuse and Neglect
- Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect
- Children and Stress
- Virtual Violence
- Bullies

These fact sheets are available from your local University of Nevada Cooperative Extension office.
Make Time for Yourself

Have some fun. Get your daily dose of pleasure. Feeling “stuck” with your children can cause stress. Use day care or swap babysitting with a friend.

Learn Good Parenting Skills

Get help if you feel you need to learn better ways of relating to or disciplining your children. Read! There are many good books and magazine articles on parenting. Take a class or workshop on child development or parenting. Learn realistic expectations of what children can do at certain ages. Improving communications skills can help you talk with and better understand your children.

Talk with Other Parents

Laugh about the silly things that children say and do. Learn about other children by sharing experiences with other parents. Join or organize a parent's group where you can come together to learn and grow. Find out what resources are available for parents in your community.

Be a Friend

Other parents also need someone to talk to for advice and support. Offer to listen. Suggest social or medical services that can help parents deal with children.

Families Working Together

A family’s emotional climate is affected by the family’s ability to resolve everyday problems and conflicts that all families experience. Families are stronger when family members are able to manage their anger, express their affection for one another, listen to each other, and compromise without resentment.

Parents can learn more effective problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. For example, one resource for increasing anger management skills is a parent training program entitled RETHINK, available through selected Extension offices. This 12-hour program has been demonstrated to be effective in reducing anger and violence, and increasing positive parenting.

The Nature of Abuse

Abuse is frightening, painful and can be life threatening. For too many people it’s a very real part of everyday life in modern America.

Abuse is the act of harming. We may harm by our thoughts, words or actions. Sometimes failure to think, speak or act can also be considered abuse. By this definition, there are many types of abuse connected to each other. For example, if the mother knows the father is abusing their child and does nothing about it, she is also guilty of abuse.

This year more than 3 million children in our country will suffer the trauma of child abuse. More than 1,100 will die as a result. In Nevada, the number of reported child abuse and neglect cases is rising each year. Child abuse happens in rural, urban and suburban areas. It affects people at all income levels, in all cultures and religions.

There are many types of child abuse. Child abuse can be physical abuse where we see marks and bruises. It can also be physical neglect, failure to provide adequate food, shelter, clothing, hygiene or medical care. Emotional abuse happens when we place excessive or unrealistic demands on a child.

Verbal abuse involves name calling, excessive yelling, criticism and/or teasing. Emotional neglect, the failure to give a child enough personal warmth, attention or supervision, hurts children too. Educational neglect results when a child doesn’t go to school on a regular basis or doesn’t participate in an adequate home schooling alternative. Sexual abuse includes incest, indecent exposure, fondling, rape and pornography. Physical and emotional bullying by other children is another common form of abuse.

Effects of Child Abuse

Child abuse and neglect can result in loss of life or permanent and serious damage to the physical, emotional and mental development of the child. Injuries may include damage to the brain, vital organs, eyes, ears, arms and legs. These injuries may result in mental retardation, blindness, deafness, or loss of a limb. Abused children have difficulty loving and trusting other people. They may have low self-esteem. Abused children often have higher levels of aggression, anxiety, impulsive reactions and self-destructiveness. They may run away or have difficulty at school. As teenagers or adults, they may act in criminal and other violent, antisocial ways.

Abuse can be replaced with understanding. Parents can learn better ways to handle their children.

Call for Help

There are many organizations and agencies that offer help to stressed parents. CHILDHELP USA, National Child Abuse Hotline, 1-800-4A CHILD (1-800-422-4453), will direct callers from any state to local sources of help. In Clark County, call 702-399-0081.

In the Reno area, the Child Abuse and Neglect Task Force of Northern Nevada, a council of the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, can be reached by calling the Crisis Hotline at 775-784-8090.

The Crisis Hotline has a toll-free number that can be called from anywhere in Nevada at 1-800-992-5757.

When there is reason to believe that a child under 18 years of age has been abused or neglected, reports can be made to the local office of the Division of Child and Family Services, to any county agency authorized by juvenile court, or to any police or sheriff's department.

Other Nevada Cooperative Extension fact sheets that deal with child abuse and stress are:

- Recognizing Child Abuse and Neglect
- Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect
- The following handouts may also be helpful and are available in English and Spanish:
  - Children and Stress 97-40
  - Virtual Violence 97-41
  - Bullies 97-42

The titles of other Nevada Cooperative Extension fact sheets that deal with child abuse and stress are:

- Be a Friend
- Make Time for Yourself
- Learn Good Parenting Skills
- Talk with Other Parents
- Family Working Together
- The Nature of Abuse
- Effects of Child Abuse
- Call for Help

These fact sheets are available from your local University of Nevada Cooperative Extension office.
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