

B. Prematurity

"We know there is a much higher incidence of abused children among the premature group."¹¹

48. There are a number of medical reasons why a child may be born before the usual period of nine months. It does not leave the comfortable life in the uterus on its own; it is evicted by conditions not of its making. In other words, the innocent victim of circumstances beyond its control, the premature baby is at risk as soon as it is born.

49. A child whose gestation period is less than 32 weeks, or which weighs under 2500 g. (5½ pounds) at birth, is considered premature. It needs special care in order to survive. Its psychological as well as physical development is incomplete. Its brain structure is not fully developed. It is immature; its mental reflexes are not fully developed; it has missed the maturing influences that the last few months in the uterus give the normal child in preparation for bonding with its mother. It is weak and frail. The digestive tract is not capable of looking after its nutritional needs. Its body is often ugly and, therefore, sometimes fails to stimulate in the parents the emotional reaction of protective love that leads to bonding between them and the infant. In a small minority of cases it is rejected by its parents and it is a tragic fact that these premature children, born vulnerable and at risk in many ways, are also much more likely than full-term infants to be abused by their parents.¹²

50. Prematurity and low birth-weight in full-term babies are among the most frequent complications of childbirth. Being born prematurely places an infant in a special category of risk in different ways, both physical and psychological. The birth process is not only a difficult but a traumatic experience, even for a strong infant of normal size. For a weak, immature or premature infant it is potentially crippling because it is delivered through an unprepared, unrelaxed birth canal and "severe parturitional injury is an imminent threat."¹³

51. Prematurity is an important cause of brain damage in children.¹⁴ Several studies have shown that children born prematurely may have neurological impairments.¹⁵ Canadian authorities have stated that mental retardation is ten times more likely to occur in the low birth-weight infant than in the normal infant. There is also a greater incidence of visual, hearing and other defects including cerebral palsy and epilepsy.¹⁶ Many prematurely born children "experience developmental retardation during at least the first two years of life."¹⁷ Children born prematurely are also more likely to show behaviour associated with minimal brain dysfunction and learning disability, in particular hyperactivity, aggressiveness and distractibility.¹⁸