

The horror of child abuse leaves permanent scars

by Mic Marentette
of The Lance
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Such a small child wanders past your home. You've seen him before. And you have always been curious about the pale face, the quiet demeanor, the hunched way he has of walking. As a caring person, you want to reach out and touch that child, take him in your arms and rock him, because you know something is very wrong in his life. But you won't - you say you can't.

Every year in Windsor and the Essex County area, an estimated seventy-five to eighty cases of child abuse occur. The rough figures for the whole of Ontario are two to three thousand cases. Deaths officially attributed to child abuse by the Chief Coroner of Ontario now average about one each month. Children are being abused physically, mentally and sexually. They are being neglected, and medically, legally and socially it is a major problem.

To better understand the situation, let us define child abuse. A child, in the Ontario Welfare Act, is a person under the age of sixteen years. Child Abuse is the neglect or maltreatment of a child by the person who has care or custody of that child, or allows ill-treatment of the child.

Abuse can take many forms. Perhaps one of the more horrific forms is sexual abuse. Incest is more common than most of us would care to acknowledge. Most victims of this abuse are girls around the age of puberty, and frequently the offender is the natural father, or the spouse or boyfriend of the mother. Children are not always damaged by these relationships and do not always want to leave the home. However, the potential for psychological damage is enormous. Although there is actually little research available on sexual abuse, it has been determined that it seldom is committed by strangers, which dispels the myth of some dirty old man waiting on a street corner for all the little girls to pass by.

Mothers may even be aware of these relationships, but for varied reasons - fear, for one - they fail to discourage them. Some girls continue these relationships to save a younger sister. The reaction to disclosure of sexual abuse is often more damaging to the child than the act itself. Expressions of horror, incredulity or blame leave scars on a child that the incestuous relationship itself would not necessarily cause.

Legal proceedings may make

matters worse. The child, like the adult rape victim, may be endlessly examined and interrogated, in private and in public. She may be blamed, punished and humiliated.

Children are also abused physically. This can range in degrees of seriousness. Excessive shaking of a small child

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may seem minor, but it can result in brain damage or death. Individuals often spot injured children, and they question the numerous bruises, but the recurrent thought is "how can I be sure?" Well, the following account is taken from a book on child abuse:

A father was waiting in the hospital for his two little boys, five and sixteen months of age, he said, "Children have to be taught respect for authority and be taught obedience. I would rather have my children grow up afraid of me and respecting me, than loving me and spoiled." This father had once again injured his two sons, intending to teach them good behaviour through his disciplinary actions. The boy's bodies were scarred, covered with multiple bruises, cuts and fractures. "He (the sixteen month old child) knows what I mean and understands it when I say come here. If he doesn't come immediately I go and give him a gentle tug on the ear to remind him of that which he is supposed to do."

The boy's ear was found by the doctor to be lacerated and partially torn away from his head.

There is no need to continue. There are thousands of these stories. Heavy beatings with chains, infants dipped into scalding water, toddlers placed on hot burners; the results of all these things are deep mental and physical scars. Think of the unending pain, the needless and insane torture.

Physical abuse can take other forms, in other words neglect of the child's basic needs. There have been cases of malnutrition, situations where the child is not properly clothed or is not bathed, or is left in an unhealthy and/or dangerous situation.

For the most part people who deal daily with children would never dream of hurting a child, but what they do not realize is the amount of damage that can be done to a child through ver-

bal admonishment.

Telling a child over and over again "you can't do that" or "you're dumb" or "you're no good" will eventually convince the child that the adult is right and they are indeed worthless. And so they will act accordingly. Children need encouragement and love. Mothering is

Absence of this mothering influence, along with verbal and emotional abuse can stunt normal growth. Even over indulgence and permissiveness can be forms of emotional abuse, but they are rarely labelled as such.

The Ministry of Community and Social Services suggests that the following are various signs of child abuse:

- A physically abused child may

have bruises, burns, cuts or scars.

- A neglected child could appear malnourished, frequently over-tired, dirty, or inappropriately clothed.

- A sexually molested child may

ren. They are perhaps:
- lonely and/or isolated.
- experiencing a number of problems.

discipline their children in any matter they deem fit. Normal people can harm their children, without necessarily meaning to do so, because parenting is not an easily acquired skill.

These parents come from every social background. They are not only from economically deprived families, or from groups that have a history of mental illness or drug addiction. It may appear that this is the case, because authorities have abused children from these groups more readily brought to their attention by outside individuals or members from within the unit.

These abusers can be treated but only once the reason for abuse is determined. The immediate goal is to stop the abuse, but this is not accomplished easily or quickly.

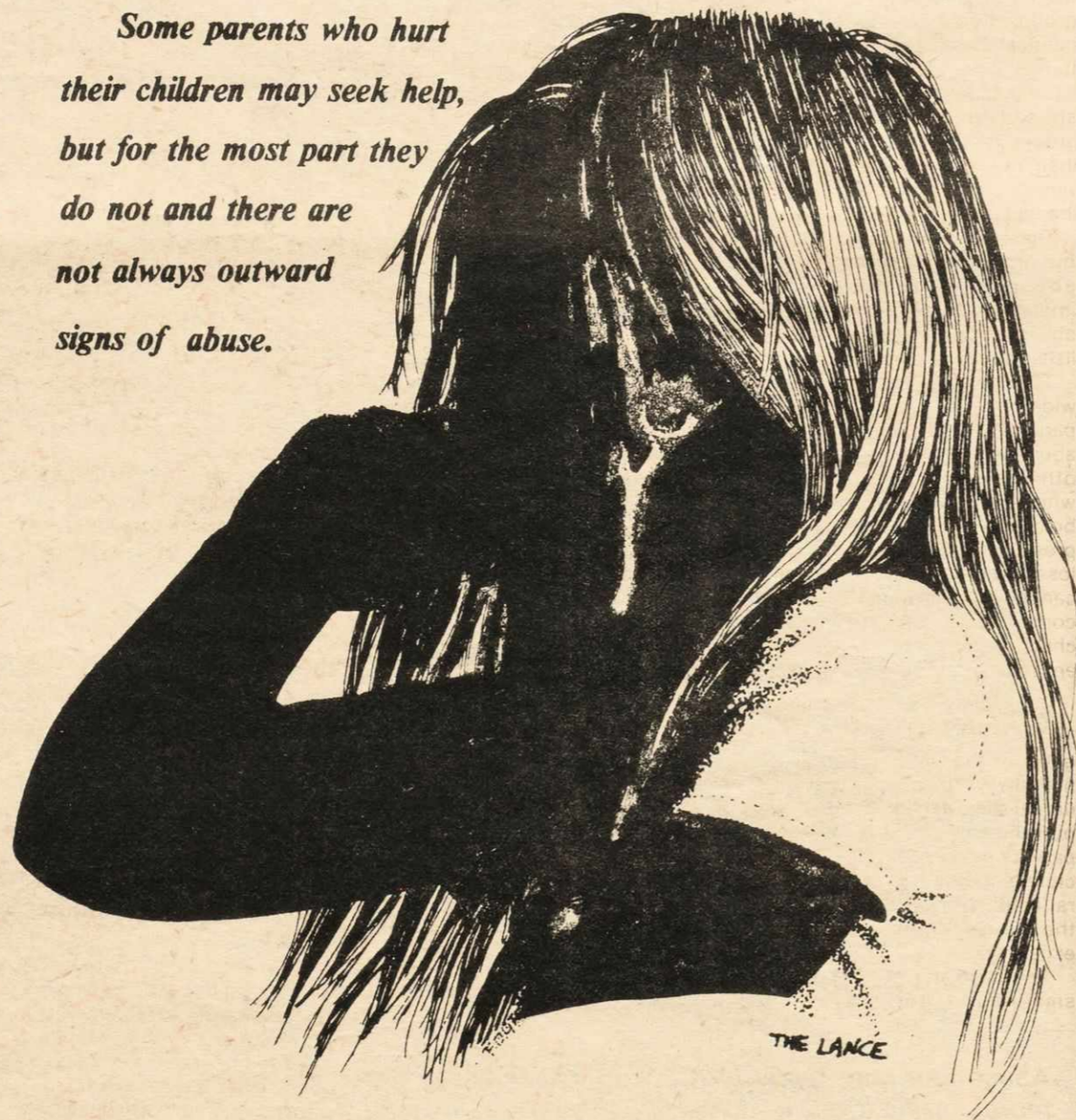
The reasons for abuse are widely varied, but there are patterns and situations in which abuse is more apparent than in others. Abuse often results when stress is brought to the breaking point by intolerable pressures, drugs or alcohol. The loss of a job, a bad day at work, can give the parent reason to come home and punish the child, thereby venting the parent's anger and frustration.

Sometimes abuse is inflicted in the belief that it is for the good of the child. Children do not always meet their parents' unrealistic standards. Physical punishment is used by some parents as an alternative to discipline. It may rise out of cultural conflict or as a repetition of the abuser's own childhood experience.

The child may be seen as a small adult not capable of

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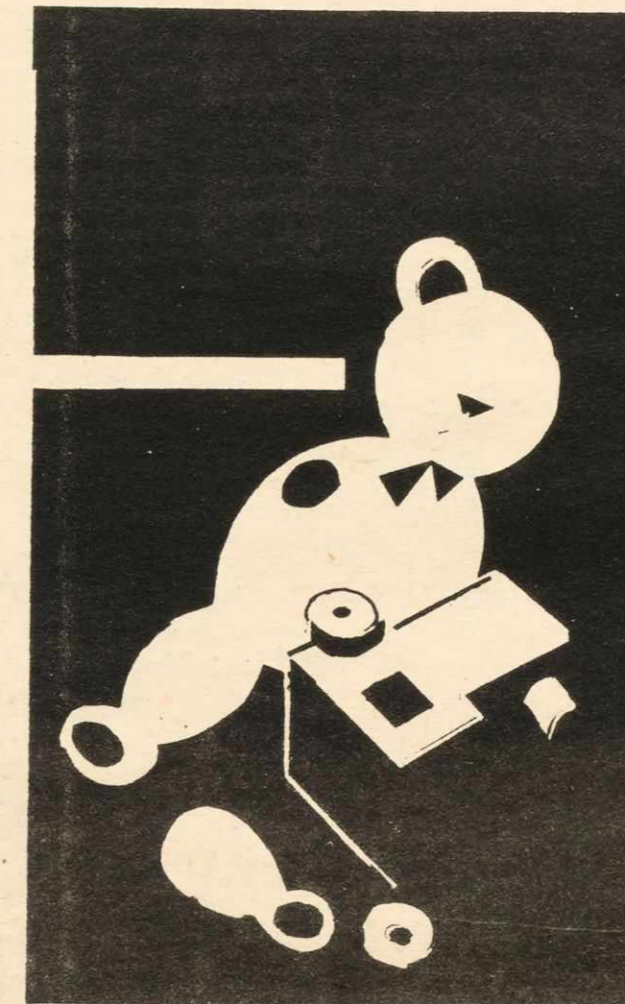


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proper adult responses and comprehension, and this frustrates them. These parents usually have a strong desire to be good parents, but they are insecure in their own abilities. When the child-parent relationship is running smoothly, the home situation is fine. But as soon as a snag occurs, they feel their "perfect parent" status is threa-

rim custodians may be able to help both the parents and children and eventually reunite the family. In some cases, when the parents do not respond to help, the best solution is the permanent removal of the child from the home. All such decisions are made by Family Court judges under the authority of The Child Welfare Act.



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Many parents feel hostile towards any treatment imposed upon them. They need support during this period from friends and family members. Treatment often takes the form of counselling from groups like Parents' Anonymous. Here the parent finds understanding and acceptance, along with the awareness that there are others who can not cope. But this treatment should take place under the advice of an experienced worker.

When a child is removed temporarily from a home, the inte-

helped if the whole family is helped. It is tragic that in many cases, even though abuse has been diagnosed, help is neither offered to the family, nor is it accepted. It does not take a specialist to recognize or suspect most forms of abuse. Friends, neighbours, public health nurses, teachers, doctors, police, social workers, clergy, school bus drivers, recreation workers, probation officers and building superintendents are

cases it may be the result of deprivation or neglect.

A child's behaviour or appearance may indicate abuse. Schoolage children may be withdrawn or overly eager to please. They may be dressed in filthy or torn clothing. These signs might be evidence of other problems, but the watchful adult should at least consider the possibility of abuse, even if the parents are "nice people."

It is up to you, the individual,

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among those who come in contact with abuse frequently. Sometimes the child will even talk about the abuse.

Everyone has seen an irate mother slapping a child in a store. Perhaps the child was crying from tiredness, and the mother became annoyed. And it might anger you to see a child; a child who is at the mercy of their parents; being hit in such a way. But you think twice before interfering. One does not have to interfere so to speak. Simply offer to watch the child while she goes through the check-out. This could be a break for her and therefore relieve some tension.

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further.

They hope to start programs with the aid of public broadcasting services, using films, talk shows and cartoons directed towards children. They hope to use news coverage that emphasizes the positive actions being taken. They also hope to encourage clubs to take up the cause for the prevention of child abuse.

Child abuse can be detected, but unfortunately many cases are left until it is too late. The more severe cases are the obvious ones, but help comes too late to a child who has been blinded, crippled to paralysis, or is dead.

Abused children can only be

their parents. The child may even invent some story or give a rehearsed explanation.

Careful examination by a doctor can determine whether or not the story concurs with the injury. X-rays may show a history of fractures in various stages of healing. People who abuse children often deny responsibility, and medical evidence may be needed if recurrence of abuse is to be prevented or if the case goes to court.

Some kinds of abuse are difficult to detect. For example, a serious delay in normal growth and development is, in many instances, the result of physical handicaps. However, in some

to help prevent child abuse. Some battered children will otherwise grow up to batter their own children, or worse yet - they may never have the chance to grow up. Failure to act can result in irreparable damage to a child. Preliminary studies suggest that many of our society's violent criminals were seriously abused, neglected or deprived as children.

Children fail to admit to the circumstances they are in for many reasons. They may be protecting other siblings, or they think they are protecting Mommy or Daddy. Every child has a strong desire to please the parent, and to be loved. After living with such punishment, they may begin to believe they truly deserve the beatings, or that all parents will react towards a child in the same manner.

These children need love, care and understanding. If you think you know a battered child, consider this next time you see him.

The problem of child abuse is everyone's responsibility and should be everyone's concern. A case of child abuse should be reported immediately to the area children's aid society. Anyone who reports suspected violence or neglect is guaranteed protection from civil liability. It is against the law to not

report a suspected case of child abuse. The law states as follows:

Every person who has reasonable grounds to suspect in the course of the person's professional or official duties that a child has suffered or is suffering from abuse that may have been caused or permitted by a person who has or has had charge of the child shall forthwith report the suspected abuse to a children's aid society (Child Welfare Act, 1978, Section 49(2).)

"Every person who contravenes subsection 2 of section 49 is guilty of an offence and on summary conviction by the court is liable to a fine of not more than \$1,000."

We are all responsible for the children of our generation. Can you stand by and watch them being tortured and hurt?