

*Children's Rights*

families in which both parents work and their children go to school without adequate breakfasts, and these children have to make do for the day with lunches of junk foods.

What are the consequences of poor nutritional standards? The ramifications are serious. Poor nutrition will lead to poor general health and a lower resistance to infection, thereby increasing the likelihood of sickness. Children who are suffering from poor general health are likely to be less alert and attentive in school; since they have less resistance to sickness, they are likely to miss days from school because of illness. Moreover, the results of poor nutrition form a vicious circle. For example, if young girls continue to have poor eating habits when they are adults, the effects of these habits are usually passed on to the next generation. Researchers have found that the physical and mental development of a child is affected by the adequacy of the mother's diet during pregnancy. This is a serious problem. We know that poor nutritional habits affect a child's mental health, physical health, as well as its learning ability.

I should like to turn to the area of child abuse. Who among us was not deeply moved by the very tragic death in the city of Ottawa last winter of little five-year-old Adrienne Paquette? The evidence showed that the Children's Aid Society returned Adrienne to her 32-year-old mother, despite overwhelming evidence indicating that this little girl had been abused and battered over the years since she was a baby. She was found dead from suffocation in the basement of the family home, with her hands tied behind her back in such a way as to force her to stand on one foot, with a gag in her mouth and a pillowcase over her head. If young Adrienne had been treated with dignity and respect as a human being, instead of as a chattel of her parents and a chattel of the Children's Aid Society of Ottawa, she might be alive today.

If we had a society which was prepared to recognize the fundamental rights of children as human beings, then Adrienne would have had an advocate to speak for her before the courts. But there was no such advocate. There was no one to speak on behalf of little Adrienne and she is dead. That is what my bill is all about. It is designed to protect the Adriennes of this country from child abuse, from irresponsible parents and irresponsible organizations which act as surrogate parents, whether it be the province or someone delegated by the province, such as the Children's Aid Society.

The House has the benefit of the recent report on child abuse and neglect. Again this was a private member's motion brought before the House. It was allowed to go to committee, and the committee came forward with an excellent study. It is difficult to know the exact incidence of child abuse in Canada because of the variations in definitions or in reporting systems. However, Dr. H. B. Cotnam, Chief Coroner of Ontario, stated that a fairly reasonable assessment can be made from United States studies which indicate a range from 225 to 350 cases per million population per year respectively. That is a substantial number.

Using this criterion, the number of cases in Canada, which has an approximate population of 22 million, would range

from 4,950 to 7,700 cases. At the present time, approximately 25 per cent of the cases occurring in a province like Ontario are being reported. That is the tragedy of it. The majority of these cases are never reported. They never get to court. Like little Adrienne, for these children it is probably too late. In 1977, the Ontario Children's Aid Society reported 1,045 cases of child abuse. In addition, child abuse was held responsible for 13 deaths in the province. How many other little children have died as a result of child abuse? There is growing evidence that this is a serious social problem in our society. It is a crime which is committed but almost never reported.

So far only the battered child syndrome has been discussed, but the appropriate standing committee of this House also found that physical abuse is the extreme end of the continuum of child neglect, and that there is no firm dividing line between neglect and abuse. Child neglect covers a wide range of situations, including situations where parents are unable or unwilling to care for the child adequately. We all know of cases. I suppose there is not a member of this House who has not had direct experience in dealing with a constituent when he knows there is child neglect. You find it in any of the middle or upper middle class neighbourhoods in this affluent city.

● (1612)

Surely it is child neglect if both parents leave at eight o'clock in the morning without taking any care to ensure that their children are provided with an adequate and nutritious breakfast, the most important meal of the day. Surely it is child neglect when those parents do not bother to check on their children during the day and these children have to fill up on junk food, such as soda pop and potato chips and all the things they eat during the day. We know that kind of inadequate diet makes for an aggressive child, makes for a difficult child and makes for a child who has difficulty in learning.

It is not without interest that we note the growth in the rate of child suicides. This shocks us all but we have to talk about these things. Children as young as five years of age are taking their own lives. This is a serious problem. There is not a day that goes by in the city of Toronto when there are not ten reported cases of attempted child or teenage suicide, and unfortunately there are often deaths.

The Minister of National Health and Welfare (Miss Bégin) has noted that as of June, 1975 there were approximately 68,000 children in the care of child welfare authorities in Canada as a result of neglect. These are the surrogate parents and many of them are not equipped either by training or any other criterion to be responsible surrogate parents of these children. Aside from the children removed from their homes, child welfare authorities are working with over 42,000 families involving approximately 96,000 children in order to protect the children from neglect by attempting to correct or mitigate the potential or actual situation in the home.

I wonder, Mr. Speaker, how far we have come from eighteenth century England when that famous English lawyer, William Blackstone, identified three duties which parents owe