

DON'T CALL IT LOVE

By Maureen Bowen, Psychologist

Do you call your children names, put them down or laugh at their ideas and efforts? Do you say bad things about your children's friends and insist that they not see them? Do you withhold attention and affection from your children until they do what you want? Do you ever lock your children out of the home? Do you physically or verbally abuse your children?

Depending on the circumstances, even a couple of yes answers may mean that your children are living in an abusive environment. Research examining the mental health outcomes of child abuse and neglect has demonstrated that childhood victimisation places children at increased risk for delinquency, adult criminality and violent crime behaviour.

It has also been found that children who are exposed to anti-social behaviours from an early age tend to make friends with children similar to themselves. Consequently, they reinforce one another's negative behaviours. Thus, children who are reared in abusive homes need to be taught about self control, understanding their emotions and positive approaches to problem solving.

Outcomes such as family conflict, depression, social isolation, school failure, substance abuse, delinquency and violence all exist in violent homes and as a consequence, impacts upon the development of children. However, being "at risk" does not doom any child to become violent. Conversely, the apparent absence of certain risks does not necessarily protect a child from problem behaviour.

The most common factor underlying all forms of abuse is the abuse of power and authority. Abuse occurs when the more physically powerful person takes advantage of the less powerful person. Some forms of abuse, however, are more difficult to detect than others e.g. child neglect.

Abuse can mean actively hurting a child, sexually exploiting a child, failing to take proper care of a child and/or depriving a child of affection and acceptance.

Abuse can include behaviours such as habitually humiliating or denying a child the nurturing he or she needs, shaking an infant, coercing a child into sexual acts over a period of years and / or permitting abuse by standing by and letting it happen. No single definition covers all types of abuse.

There is also to single reason why people abuse children. Abuse is not confined to any one group of people. It cuts across all ethnic, religious, economic and educational backgrounds.

Children who have been abused require help. Without help, they are at great risk for becoming abusing adults themselves. Long terms effects of child abuse include fear,

anxiety, depression, anger, hostility, inappropriate sexual behaviour, poor self-esteem, tendency towards substance abuse and difficulty with close relationships

Abuse can be the result of one or two relatively isolated incidents, or it can be the result of a “condition of abuse”. This is a series of acts of abuse that take place over prolonged period of time.

It is the responsibility of every adult to stop the cycle of abuse to children, since there is no doubt of its detrimental effects on our families, communities and society. As adults we have the responsibility to protect and nurture those persons who are placed in our direct or indirect care. That is a responsibility that we cannot afford to abdicate.

Some signs of child abuse

- Unexplained bruises, cuts or fractures on different parts of the body
- Aggression
- Withdrawal
- Depression
- Constant fatigue
- Stealing
- Poor hygiene
- Unkempt appearance
- Malnourishment
- Complaints of pain or itching in the genital area
- Sexual promiscuity
- Significant drop in school performance
- Loss of interest in school
- High absenteeism
- Poor relationship with peers e.g. begging and peddling