

A National Call to Action: Approaching the Elimina- tion of Child Maltreatment

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The idea that child maltreatment might be reduced or totally eliminated is relatively new and definitely audacious. In fact, the recognition of something called child abuse is new, having emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1860, Ambroise Tardieu (the father of forensic medicine) described 32 cases of children with injuries related to physical abuse. He also described injuries from sexual abuse. However, his concern that such cases should be identified and their perpetrators punished does not appear to have been widely shared (Tardieu, 1860). His seminal papers were followed by a century of silence. With the "Mary Ellen" case, at the turn of the century, and the medical recognition of abuse of infants and young children, between 1950 and 1960, definitions of abusive behaviors and their effects began to appear. The feminist movement of the 19th and 20th centuries gave substantial impetus to the developing concerns about child abuse (Olafson, Corwin, & Summit, 1993).

John Stuart Mill elaborated the principle that liberty is limited to actions that do not harm other persons (Mill, 1859). In the same essay, he called attention to the problems of abuse in the home and the neglect of children. This philosophy underlies the later laws that aim to protect children and other vulnerable persons from abuse by the persons close to them. A preliminary definition and classification of child abuse was part of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974. The four forms that were defined are: physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. A connection between all forms of abuse and poverty was recognized, however the complexity of this connection has been pointed out by Garbarino (1997).

PURSUIT OF CONSENSUS IN THE PROFESSIONAL SECTORS

As professional and public attention to the problem of child abuse developed, more persons began to regard abusive actions as intolerable and to propose a variety of interventions that might reduce them. Public consciousness and concern about the problem waxes and wanes, but it now seems unlikely to fade to levels that existed prior to 1960. Professional consciousness of the problem continues to grow, although consensus about solutions is not yet at hand. The advent of the "information age" is affecting public and professional attitudes profoundly, but it is difficult to know how these changes will affect the approach to child abuse.

An early step toward the elimination of child abuse is to identify the sets of persons who have concerned themselves with the problem and to determine what these professionals think should be done. At least four professional "sectors" are involved. Because each of these sectors "owns" a piece of the problem at the level of individual cases and at the policy level, the need for interdisciplinary communication and cooperation is immense.

Social Services (and Social Sciences)

Since the passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act in 1974, the Social Services sector has played the dominant role in dealing with child maltreatment. Most of the efforts have been provided through public social services at State and County levels throughout the U.S. The interest of the "State" in the protection of children from abuse has focused on social interventions, and more funding has been provided to this sector than to any other. Social Services rely on interventions that support families in providing better care for their children or which protect endangered children by removal to safer settings.

Justice

The "Justice Sector" includes law enforcement agencies, criminal and civil attorneys, and courts. As most acts of child abuse constitute crimes, Justice plays a major role in dealing with the problems. However, its major focus has been on relatively severe cases of physical and sexual abuse. The role of the Justice Sector has been growing rapidly in recent years as a result of public concern about crime and crime victims. The Justice Sector relies on deterrence to reduce the incidence of actions that society has decided are not tolerable.

Health

The health presence in the field of child maltreatment began with the forensic medical writings of Tardieu in 1860. However, after Tardieu, physicians pretty much ignored the problem until the work of Caffey (1946), Silverman (1953), and Kempe et al. (1962) refocused their attention. Two lines of approach developed:

Personal Health

The personal health approach looks at child abuse cases one at a time. It has provided a rapidly growing medical science and practice for the recognition and forensic medical substantiation of physical abuse, physical and medical neglect, and sexual abuse. Similarly, mental health professionals have focused their efforts on the treatment of individuals who have been abused or neglected. Personal health professionals can recognize abused persons in their care and can prevent some abuse through anticipatory guidance linked to health care. Home visiting programs linked to health care are used in a number of countries and may prevent child abuse.

The public health approach concerns itself with the overall effects of abuse on the health of a population and looks for methods of prevention. Scattered efforts to bring this approach to bear on child maltreatment have occurred; however, there is still little activity in the public health field affecting the problem. The need to consider child abuse and other forms of violence as a public health problem has been stated by a succession of Surgeons-General, beginning with Everett Koop and continuing through Jocelyn Elders. The work of Michael Durfee (Durfee, Gellert, & Tilton-Durfee, 1992) in defining child homicide as a marker for physical abuse is exemplary.

Education

Educators can play very significant roles in the attempts to eliminate child maltreatment. Their extensive contacts with children make them a major source of case finding. They are also in a position to contribute mightily to prevention efforts by conveying information about maltreatment to children and their parents.

THE NATIONAL CALL TO ACTION

In 1997, Blair Sadler began to ask leaders in the field about their goals and objectives and about the existence of any national strategic plans. Although many individuals had very well developed ideas, there was no concerted national plan and no concerted effort in place to implement a plan. That such things might actually happen appeared to be an idea whose time had arrived. Following are events that took place in 1998 and 1999.

APSAC Meeting, June 1998, Miami

The idea of the National Call to Action was proposed in a special session at this meeting. Since then, APSAC has had this idea under consideration and has been developing ideas related to its participation.

San Diego Conference, January 1999

The timing of this Conference coincided with a decision by the U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno to enhance national efforts to deal with the problem of Children Exposed to Violence, and Deputy Attorney General Eric Holder opened the Conference with a message about the Attorney General's initiative. This was followed by five major talks about the possible elimination of child abuse, given by distinguished senior experts in the field and summarized by Jocelyn Elders. Twenty organizations that had expressed interest in the process contributed comments about the potential process, and this work has been summarized and is being circulated to a growing list of "seers." Ten action items were endorsed:

- In the public sector, significantly increase the links between social services, justice, health, and education, and dramatically increase the level of funding for prevention, treatment, education, and research.
- In the private sector, invite leaders to create a new organization or coalition of organizations that can effectively coordinate efforts.
- The new coalition should be built from the top down and the bottom up. Successful models, such as the American Cancer Society, should be examined.
- The coalition should create a clear mission statement, a powerful rallying cry, and a clear, multi-year strategic plan.
- The coalition or a lead organization should secure planning and startup funds from major national philanthropies.
- Highly respected, credible, and effective public figures should be identified to lead the effort.
- The efforts of all national organizations should be coordinated through the new coalition.
- Major national meetings of sponsoring organizations and the National Summit on Children Exposed to Violence should be systematically used to advance the agenda.
- Many key organizations should formally endorse the effort.
- A first, detailed action plan for the amelioration of child maltreatment should be presented at the San Diego Conference in January 2000.

Publication of Proceedings

The Proceedings of the Call to Action from the 1999 San Diego Conference was published in October 1999 in *Child Abuse and Neglect*. A special issue of the Journal devoted to this topic records much of the thinking that developed up to that point (Chadwick, D.L., 1999).

ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ONGOING EFFORT

Early in 1999, Anne Cohn Donnelly formally joined the effort and has since been engaged in the process of developing a professional consensus around what needs to be done. Central to this effort is the idea that child

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maltreatment deserves the same sorts of approach as that provided for cancer, heart disease, and other major health problems.

Identification of Major Issues

A number of major issues will require resolution before we can seriously discuss the elimination of child maltreatment. A partial list of these follows.

Better Definitions and Better Measurement: What Do We Wish to Eliminate (or Reduce)?

The National Research Council identified the problem of definitions in 1993, and it remains unsolved in 1999. At present, it is still almost impossible to determine if the problem of child maltreatment is changing for better or for worse. Small or moderate changes in incidence or prevalence are not currently detectable. This is a problem requiring immediate attention by public health and the social and justice sciences. The problem of serious reduction simply cannot be intelligently addressed until definitions and measurement instruments are in place. Whereas, the counting of reported cases of child abuse probably must continue as an administrative tool, it is not sufficient as a way of measuring our progress. Survey techniques (Strauss & Kantor, 1987) consistently yield much higher rates of all forms of violence than do studies that count reported cases, however they are not utilized by public agencies to judge performance and trends. Health-generated definitions for serious physical abuse could also be developed and utilized if and when public health becomes seriously concerned with the problem.

Child Maltreatment and Other Forms of Family Violence

The co-occurrence of child maltreatment and violence affecting other family members has been noted frequently. The question then is whether child abuse can be eliminated without addressing other forms of family violence in a unified manner. Each form of violence now has its own constituency, and approaches are often competitive. Although the barriers between these professional sectors are significant, programs addressing more than one form of family violence are emerging.

Absence of a Popular Constituency

Unlike cancer, which shortens the lives of enfranchised adults, persons harmed by child abuse are disenfranchised children who often are abused by those who should protect them. Although adult survivors and supportive family members exist in large numbers, they have not generally organized themselves in a politically effective manner. This is a problem in need of early attention. Elected governmental officials are unlikely to do much if their constituents are generally indifferent to the problem. The "critical antecedents" described by Krugman (1999) as essential to effective political action cannot develop without more popular support.

The Roles of Professional Sectors: Whose Job Is It?

Multidisciplinary teams working on cases at the local level often develop very effective methods for the division of labor, but there is no national guideline that defines the role of the sectors. Somehow, this approach must be adopted by the states and by national government. The funding streams going to Social Services, Justice, Health, and Education must be blended and focused on the problems of child abuse and other forms of family violence. This probably cannot happen quickly, but the enabling policies that will bring about joint efforts must be established promptly. The answer to the question, "Whose job is it?" is "Yes!"

Can We Speak With One Voice?

A closely related issue is that of developing statements of "fact" and of policy and practice that can be agreed upon by all the professional sectors. If we cannot achieve better consensus within the "field," we are unlikely to succeed in a major national effort to eliminate the problem. For example, the question about the allocation of resources for the primary or secondary prevention of various forms of abuse versus those for punishment or repair after the fact of abuse is likely to generate considerable disagreement. And, this is just one of many questions. Here again, the answer to the question "Whose theory is best?" is "Yes!" Although, ultimately, ineffective approaches must be abandoned, our past measurements of effectiveness do not permit quick conclusions about what the best approaches are.

What Sort of Vehicle Could Carry the Process?

There is an immediate need to develop an organization that can carry on the process. Clearly, this cannot be a single hospital or any other single service-providing agency. The entity must have a very broad base of support.

Existing Organizations: Existing candidate organizations include those with broad missions and broad support, such as Prevent Child Abuse America and APSAC; however, an even broader base than either of those possesses may be needed.

A Possible New Business Entity: The necessary vehicle must be like the fabulous "One-Hoss Shay" of Oliver Wendell Holmes in that it is constructed to run for a very long time, but it must also be capable of carrying a huge

variety of individuals and organizations whose support and thinking will be essential in getting the job done. Thus, both durability and capacity for diversity are important.

Public and Private Ownership: It is inconceivable to consider the elimination of child maltreatment without involvement of the public entities that represent the State's interest in the protection of children, the integrity of families, and the enforcement of laws against abuse. Specifically, both public social services and all public components of the Justice sector must remain involved. A new not-for-profit corporation may be the best solution.

What Will It Cost?

Without a clear view of the size of the problem, the cost of solving it cannot be determined. However, the costs of not solving it must also be estimated, and this also requires better definitions and methods than what is currently available. In addition, costs must be discussed in terms other than just dollars. Some calculus that deals with the price of pain must be put into place as we approach this issue.

How Long Will It Take?

This question can only be answered when we have decided exactly what we intend to eliminate or reduce, but surely it will take some time. Expectations for quick success are likely to lead to disappointment and abandonment of the effort. Still, if we use our best brains and make a serious effort, we should be able to produce perceptible change. In fact, as deMause has pointed out (deMause, 1974), it is likely that things are better already if we take a long view of human history.

APPROACHING CONSENSUS

Utilizing a "Delphic" approach to consensus-building, Ann Donnelly and others will attempt to deal with these and other issues that affect our approach to the elimination of child maltreatment. Some of the issues, such as determining the essential vehicle, must be settled quickly. Others, such as definitional processes, will require at least two years to accomplish once they are properly launched. Existing best practice guidelines will need to be utilized and updated, as new information becomes available.

As the process progresses and when the new entity comes into existence, it will be essential to build solid systems for document management and consensus development. Without such a capability, the likelihood of informational chaos is high. The process could bog down in an information swamp.

APSAC AND THE NATIONAL CALL TO ACTION

The National Call to Action provides a number of opportunities for APSAC and simultaneously poses a number of questions. APSAC could consider stepping forward and becoming the central organization in the initiative, or it could work toward the development of a new entity. It could foster the primary role for an existing organization, such as the National Child Abuse Coalition or Prevent Child Abuse America. The most important and the most difficult task along the road to elimination is that of developing a professional consensus about what should be done. It is difficult to imagine this consensus occurring without major work by APSAC Committees and its Board of Directors. The Officers and the Board are likely to be grappling with these questions during the months to come, and input from members is important. This is a time when ideas can have a major impact.

A NEW NAME FOR THE PROCESS

The term "National Call to Action" should be replaced soon. It is great for the launch, but probably not so good for the long trip. Whether a new not-for-profit corporation is formed or an existing organization steps up to take charge of the process, both the entity and the process should be renamed to express the concepts involved in the mission—which is to greatly reduce the incidence and prevalence of maltreatment of children and other vulnerable persons.

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