A Historical Perspective of Child Abuse

Children have always been subject to abuse by their parents and other adults. In ancient Rome fathers could, and did, treat their children abusively. They used them sexually and punished them with extreme physical harshness for disobeying or merely displeasing them. They punished them to death in many cases. In many ancient societies parents put unwanted or deformed children to death. For thousands of years laws failed to protect our young. Children being beaten and abandoned by their parents was an accepted feature of society, in part because people believed and accepted the view that children were essentially the property of their parents. Under English common law, for example, children were considered their father’s property until the eighteenth century. American colonists in the seventeenth and eighteenth century continued this tradition, recognizing children as property, but also as asset that could be employed in the performance of valuable farm labor.

In the U.S. in early 1870 child abuse first captured the public’s attention. Etta Wheeler, a church worker who was asked to visit a foster family, found a nine year old foster child, Mary Ellen, severely malnourished, beaten, scarred, and shackled to a bed. The child told her that she was beaten and whipped on a daily basis. Mrs. Wheeler went to authorities to report this situation but was turned away. With no organization in existence to protect abused children, the child’s case was taken by attorneys serving the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to animals (ASPCA). These attorneys argued that laws protecting animals from abuse should not be greater than those existing to protect children. The case went before a judge who convicted the foster mother of assault and battery and gave her a one year prison sentence. Mary Ellen was placed in appropriate foster care where she thrived. She later married, had two children of her own and lived to the age of 92. Significantly the case generated enough outrage and publicity
about child abuse that in 1874 citizens formed the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

Nonetheless society tolerated the abuse of children by their parents and family members as a personal matter, although it began to be condemned when perpetrated by strangers. The recognition of multiple forms of child abuse (physical, sexual, emotional) and neglect gained greater attention in the early twentieth century.

In 1962 an article appearing in the Journal of the American Medical Association described the symptoms of child abuse and deemed it medically diagnosable (Kempe et al., 1962). Thereafter, within ten years all fifty states had passed mandatory reporting laws, requiring certain categories of professionals, i.e. physicians and teachers, to report suspected child abuse to police and other authorities. At this point the physical abuse neglect of children were recognized, but it wasn’t until the 1970s that child sexual abuse was recognized. In the late 1980s, experts began to recognize the emotional abuse of children.

Legally, the first federal legislation to protect children and prevent child abuse was passed in 1973. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) was signed into law on January 31, 1974 by President Richard M. Nixon. Enacted in an effort to eliminate child abuse by funding programs to help individuals identify and report child abuse and to provide shelter and other protective services to victims of child abuse, this law has been amended many times during the years since, most recently in a bill signed by President Barack Obama in 2010. Primarily, however, CAPTA functions to direct funds to states and social service agencies for use in protective programs and providing services for children.
In 1982 the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives noted that children continued to be abused and harmed at an alarming rate. They recognized the need for innovative programs to highlight the problem, to prevent child abuse, and to assist parents and families affected by maltreatment. The week of June 6-13, 1982 was designated as the first annual National Child Abuse Prevention Week.

In 1983 April was designated the first national Child Abuse Prevention Month, resulting in child abuse awareness and prevention activities being promoted all during the month of April. Many governors also issue proclamations urging appropriate awareness and activities throughout the month.

The development of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect and the National Clearinghouse of Child Abuse and Neglect Information (NCCAN) are federal agencies overseen by the Department of Health and Human Services. These agencies are responsible for the regulation of child abuse laws with regard to the apportionment of funding to applicable and approved institutions providing advocacy and protection for a child who has been abused.

The development of independent and private institutions providing for the protection of children have also been common in the United States, and subsequent to the review and applicability expressed by child abuse laws, many institutions are eligible to receive federal assistance in fulfilling their missions.

The primary responsibility for child welfare services, including child abuse services rests with each state. Each state has legal and administrative structures and programs to address the needs of children and families. States must comply with federal guidelines in order to be eligible to receive federal funding for these programs.
Most states aggressively prosecute child abusers under existing laws. They also actively promote awareness activities. Charities also are focused on child abuse awareness in an effort to prevent abuse and the causes linked to it. Poverty, illiteracy, cultural and religious traditions, and alcohol and substance all play a role in creating conditions which seem to lead to child abuse, and all are human services concerns.

Abuse of children, unfortunately, is not just in our history. It continues today in disturbing numbers. It appears we have recognized and successfully defined the four types of child abuse, but solutions are far from maturity. We have laws, both state and federal, to punish those convicted of abuse of children, and we have registries of child sex offenders designed to alert the public and prevent such convicted individuals from later being employed in certain professions (child care for example). We have federal, state, community, and faith based programs publicizing and advising child abuse programs, but we are a long way from any real answer to prevent and fully protect our children from abuse. We are in a react mode and still searching for fully formed answers to this insidious problem. And we in the U.S are not alone. The World Health Organization reported in 2001 that at least 40 million children worldwide are abused each year.

References:
