The Battered Child: A Review Of The Literature

Mary Patricia Rice

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.henryford.com/hfhmedjournal

Part of the Life Sciences Commons, Medical Specialties Commons, and the Public Health Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarlycommons.henryford.com/hfhmedjournal/vol12/iss4/4

This Part I is brought to you for free and open access by Henry Ford Health System Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Henry Ford Hospital Medical Journal by an authorized editor of Henry Ford Health System Scholarly Commons.
THE BATTERED CHILD

A Review of the Literature

MARY PATRICIA RICE, M.S.W.

Among the traditional values of modern Western Society, that of protection and care of children by their parents is one of the most revered and widely accepted. Recently, however, physicians, social workers, law enforcement officers, and the general public have been shocked into awareness that some children are brutally mistreated rather than nurtured by their parents. The term "BATTERED CHILD SYNDROME" was coined by Kempe. This term refers to a condition in which a child had received serious and willful physical abuse from the hands of parents or others caring for the child.

It is well accepted by authorities on this subject that children who show evidence of having been physically abused also show signs of neglect such as malnutrition, and poor bodily hygiene. The literature regarding the medical aspect of this subject has been reviewed and is being presented in this study.

It is quite difficult to accurately determine the incidence of the battered child syndrome for there have been few comprehensive studies of known cases not to mention that unknown number of cases that occur each year without being detected. There have been a few limited studies, however, which give an indication that this problem is more widespread than one would imagine.

Until relatively recent years the battered child was not looked upon as a problem. In primitive societies and early civilization, infanticide was common. In ancient Rome the concept of "Patria Potestas" gave to the father absolute power over his children. Flogging was used as a means of making them better people. Somewhat later the buying and selling of children for use as beggars and in circuses was not uncommon. The practice of child beating was even condoned by some religions. "Calvanism dictated that only by complete breaking of the will could the child be 'saved' from his inborn evil spirit."

Though some people have retained this philosophy in modified form, in general it is believed that this society is an enlightened one which offers to every child at

*From a thesis presented for a degree of Master of Social Work at the University of Michigan.
**Formerly, Social Service Department, second year student.
RICE

least the bare minimum of care and protection. This cultural emphasis of the rights of children and the duties of parents is so strong that some parents will not even admit that they spank their children occasionally.1

In 1951, however, Eustace Chesser reported in England that on the basis of the 1949 statistical figures compiled by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, between six and seven children, out of every 100 are, at some time during their childhood, so neglected or mistreated, or become so maladjusted that they require the help of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.2

In this country in 1960 a study was done by the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. The sample consisted of 115 families with 180 children who had been referred to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1960 for child abuse. The sources of referral were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relatives</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Authorities</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbors</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitals and Doctors</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A striking finding was that although physicians and hospitals were involved in 30 per cent of the cases, they were responsible for only nine per cent of the referrals.2 In 86 per cent of the cases the abuse was inflicted by the parents, about half by mothers and half by fathers.2 Half of these abused children were under seven years of age, and three-quarters were under 13 years.2 In 50 per cent of the cases, the child had been conceived prior to marriage.2 Findings about the sociological and psychological characteristics of these families will be discussed in Chapter IV.

In 1962, Kempe reported the results of a one-year nation-wide study of hospitals.4 The 71 hospitals that replied reported 32 cases of the battered child syndrome.4 Thirty-three of these children died while 85 suffered permanent brain injury.4 In only one-third of the cases was legal action taken.4

The Children’s Division of the American Humane Association conducted a study of reports of battered children that appeared in newspapers in 1962. The number of injured children reported were 662 and they belonged to 557 families.5 The ages ranged from nearly infancy to 17 years though only 16 per cent were over 10 years of age and 55.7 per cent were under four.5 About 25 per cent or 178 of these children died, 54 per cent being under two years of age and 80 per cent under four.5 Parents together were responsible for 72.57 per cent of the injuries and 75.85 per cent of the fatalities.5 While fathers were responsible for 8.25 per cent of the injuries and the mother only 28.86 per cent, the mothers caused 48.54 per cent of the fatalities and the fathers 22.22 per cent.5 While there was almost no difference between the number of abusive fathers and abusive mothers, about six times as many
step-fathers than step-mothers caused injury to their children.6 Only a few foster parents and other relatives were reported. Most of the parents were between 21 and 30 years of age.6 The average age of the mothers was 26 years while that of the fathers was 30.26 years years.

Sixty-seven per cent of the mothers were married at the time of the beating and 30 per cent were divorced or separated.6 As in other reports, only half of the children were conceived in wedlock.6

The National Observer, March 30, 19647 reprinted this excerpt from Vincent DeFrancis’ preliminary report on this study:

“By far the greater number of injuries resulted from beatings with various kinds of implements and instruments. The hairbrush was a common implement used to beat children. However, the deadlier impact by the use of bare fists, straps, electric cords, TV aerials, ropes, rubber hose, fan belts, sticks, wooden spoons, pool cues, bottles, broom handles, baseball bats, chair legs, and in one case a sculling oar. Less imaginative but equally effective, was plain kicking with street shoes or with heavy work shoes.

“Children had their extremities—hands, arms, and feet—burned in open flames as from gas burners or cigaret lighters. Others bore wounds inflicted on their bodies with lighted cigarettes, electric irons, or hot pokers. Still others were scaled by hot liquids thrown over them or from being dipped into containers of hot liquids.

“Some children were strangled or suffocated by pillows held over their mouths or plastic bags held over their heads. A number were drowned in bathtubs and one child was buried alive.

“To complete the list, children were stabbed, bitten, shot, subjected to electric shock, were thrown violently to the floor or against a wall, were stamped on, and one child had pepper forced down his throat.”

While as was stated before, more than half of these children were under four years of age, most studies find the victims to be even younger. A study of 50 children from Children’s Hospital in Pittsburgh during the years 1951-1960 revealed that 60 per cent were under nine months with the peak occurring at three months as compared with two years for childhood accidents in general.6 The range of the ages were from one month to eight years.6 Twenty (40 per cent) of the children exhibited some degree of growth retardation and 14 had subdural hematome of which nine also had convulsions.6 Three of the children died in the hospital and five later.6 Anemia and dehydration were among the most prevalent accompanying disorders.6 One important finding of this study was that “a child with multiple bone injuries has 50 per cent chance of being reinjured should he return to his usual habitat following hospitalization.”

These studies report some of the known cases of battered children. But what about those that are unknown? Kempe speculates that for every victim identified,
100 go undetected. Does this possibility affect statistics on the high incidence of accidental death and injury among children?

The National Vital Statistics Division of the United States indicated cancer to be the major cause of pediatric deaths, 8.1 percent per 100,000 population in 1959. Accidental deaths in children ranked 175 per cent higher than deaths due to cancer in children between the ages of one and 14 years.10

Accidents, most of which occur at home, are also an outstanding cause of permanent and disabling injuries among this age group.11 It is interesting to note that burns are the cause of most fatal home accidents11 and these are also a leading cause of child abuse.

According to Miller, however, it should be kept in mind that “there are two categories of fractures among children that are more prevalent than those caused by assault and neglect: (1) The common larger group of simple fractures incurred at play or during the normal activities of childhood, and (2) a smaller more serious group of complex fractures from motor accidents.”

These accidents, however, may have more meaning than can be seen at first glance. McClave and Shaffer wrote that accident-prone families are not as closely knit as non-accident families and that the children in these families don’t have their dependency and security needs satisfactorily met at home.13

REFERENCES