

Child Abuse – Are We All Responsible?

Child abuse in all its terrible forms is a worsening social problem in Australia, with the number of substantiated cases rising by 20% in 2011-12. Australia-wide, the number of reported cases of children being abused last year was 48,420. Of these 2,759 were in Western Australia.

These statistics provide a sad insight into the level of pain that exists among the most vulnerable in our community - our children. But the figures do not portray the real harm done to so many children that is carried over into adult life. Many abused kids often blame themselves for what is perpetrated on them by adults they trust. They can be left with a lifelong fear of getting close to people and trusting them. They may be sad, confused and suffer from low self-esteem. Flashbacks, nightmares and reliving the abuse are common long-term consequences. The impact on a child trying to achieve educational milestones is seriously compromised and results in lifelong consequences to the child and the nation.

The above figures present a disturbing picture of Australia today. Why does child abuse remain so prevalent among us? Why are the statistics getting worse rather than better? Why in a modern, educated and rich society do we still have children experiencing such painful events? There are no easy answers to these questions. However, the awful nature of abuse demands that we reflect more deeply on the issue.

Child abuse is usually carried out by individuals and in secrecy. Individuals are responsible for the abusive action and its consequences. Our society makes it very clear that the abuse of children is unacceptable and significant penalties are imposed on those who perpetrate such violence.

There is, however, another aspect to child abuse and it relates to our collective responsibility as distinct from that of the perpetrators. In reality child abuse is both an individual and community problem. As such, there is an individual and shared responsibility both for its existence and its resolution.

Violence is so prevalent in our community that it should be no surprise it is also committed against our children.

You only need to look at the extent of family violence to gain an insight into how force is used by many, usually men, to deal with complex family dynamics. More than 9,000 restraining orders were issued in Western Australia in the past 12 months.

Force continues to be used as a means of resolving disputes between and within nations, groups or families. This historical legacy creates a subtle, unconscious background that underpins much of our societal violence.

We are increasingly asked to view violence as entertainment, whether in films, TV or video games. In real life there are countless examples of the use of force in our community towards the weak and the innocent, whether adult or child. We can, therefore, rightly question to what extent this love affair with violence is contributing to the high levels of child abuse in our communities.

Child abuse is a violent act but we have two sets of rules for violence against children. You are allowed to hit your own child but not someone else's. It's time that we reviewed our attitude to violence and the role it plays in our society and seriously consider what it may be doing to our children.

The reality that violence against children is not only an individual but a societal responsibility expresses itself in different ways. Only recently the mother of a daughter that, due to mental illness, had killed her children related how guilty she, her family and others felt about what had happened. Her guilt was due to the fact that she had not realised how unable her daughter had become to look

after herself and her children. She, her relatives and friends don't need to feel responsible for what happened. However, her heartfelt statements suggests that such events have a community as well as an individual dimension. This mother's anguish prompts us to look with greater awareness towards our relatives, friends and neighbours so that we may help avert such tragedies.

In a recent article published in the *Brisbane Times* a former child protection worker and manager stated:

...So when a child is identified at risk, they are labelled as a DoCS (Department) case and others can then absolve themselves of responsibility and shake their heads in pious criticism when children are not removed. If we are truly concerned about the next generation of children, we must address social disadvantage at a systemic and not a family level, and that includes serious efforts to improve the housing, health and income of the most marginalised in society.

This former child protection worker is making it clear that the responsibility for the ongoing presence of child abuse in our community is not just due to the horrendous actions of individuals but also to society's inaction on important issues such as housing and mental health.

The ways to reduce child abuse are the same now as they were in the 1930s when they were first studied - effective support for mental health and substance abuse, education, housing and employment.

We need to ensure that our policy makers fully understand that imposing measures that make it harder for families to meet their day to day essential needs will inevitably lead to an increase in violence against children.

We hold both an individual and communal obligation to ensure children don't continue to live in conditions that are likely to contribute to their abuse. We need to examine our lifestyle choices and assess whether or not they enhance the quality of life of ourselves, our children and the community as a whole. If we are genuinely serious about reducing the incidence of child abuse then we have no option but to improve the circumstances in which children live.

A society that truly values its children does all it can to ensure their happiness and wellbeing. If we are to significantly diminish child abuse in Australia then we need to accept each child as our own and act accordingly. We have to see them for who they are and not for what they may become.

Accepting that we each have an individual and collective responsibility to stop child abuse is essential to achieving it.

We can no longer say it is too costly to invest in those things that enhance the safety and health of our children. The vision of an Australia where children can flourish is what is needed. Unless we commit ourselves to achieving such a vision we will continue to sow seeds of regret.

Tony Pietropiccolo AM
Director