

Dictionary of Policing

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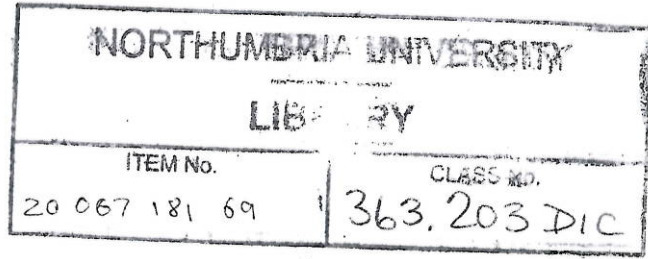
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CHILD ABUSE

Child abuse is one form of the maltreatment of a child or young person under 18 years of age.

Four major categories of child abuse can be identified. First is physical abuse and, among the forms this can take, are hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning and suffocating. Secondly, sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities. The persistent ill-treatment of a child can also be by way of emotional abuse, whereas a more passive form of child maltreatment is neglect. The former causes severe adverse effects on the child's emotional development, whereas the latter represents a failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs and can result in the serious impairment of a child's health or development.

Extent and seriousness

As suggested above, there are various forms of child abuse, and the risks to the very young of being seriously and repeatedly abused are staggeringly high. There are also complex links between domestic violence and child abuse. Children under the age of 1 are more at risk of being murdered than any other age group. One National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) estimate suggests that 1 in 10 young adults have suffered serious abuse or neglect in childhood.

All children are most at risk to all these forms of abuse from those who care for them. Some 600 children are added to the child protection register every week. Children in local authority care are also at risk of serious forms of abuse, and deaths and suicides have resulted in these residencies. Parents, however, are the principal suspects in the vast majority of all child homicides. Child sexual abuse also occurs more frequently in the familial context than it does in public spaces and by predatory paedophile strangers.

Working together to prevent and protect: multi-agencyism

Following the death of Maria Colwell in 1973, the problem of child abuse is said to have been redis-

covered. This was an era when the role of the police as an investigatory body was less central than that of social services. By the mid-1980s there was a further resurgence of widespread concern about child abuse tragedies following Jasmine Beckford (1984), Kimberley Carlile (1986) and the Cleveland Affair (1987).

In 2000, Victoria Climbié died. While multi-agency work has now become firmly recognized as fundamental to the prevention of child abuse and to its investigation, this did not prevent this terrible child abuse ordeal. Interagency communication and co-ordination, as well as inter-professional co-operation, have long been seen as essential to the effective prevention and policing of all forms of child abuse and to tackling victimization and bringing perpetrators to account. Indeed, the conclusions of the Victoria Climbié Inquiry (Laming 2003) confirmed that the legislative framework for the well-being and safety of children was sound. Fundamental and radical changes in the way the key public services are managed was central to its 108 recommendations.

In many instances, it is teachers, health professionals and social workers who are first alerted to and suspicious of child abuse. However, the Police Service has a range of responsibilities in preventing and detecting child abuse and protecting children (see Department of Health 1999, 2000). The police also have responsibilities in connection with the policing of domestic violence, which can cut across issues concerning child abuse. At one level, therefore, the police have a duty and responsibility to investigate criminal offences committed against children. The police also have a responsibility to co-ordinate and lead the risk assessment and management process for the exchange of information about all those dealt with by the courts for a sexual offence.

Child victims, abuse and the criminal justice system

The roles and responsibilities of various agencies that are formally connected to the criminal justice system impact variously upon the effective prevention, policing and experiences of child victims. The criminal justice system (the police, in particular) is pivotal in gathering sufficient evidence to bring criminal charges and to

achieving criminal justice. Concomitant to this, the police, the courts and criminal proceedings generally are potential sources of further negative experiences for child victims as witnesses. This can amount to secondary victimization where victims of child abuse are especially vulnerable to experiencing reactions and responses from individuals, groups or agencies that add to their suffering.

It is only recently that children have been recognized as vulnerable victims and witnesses who deserve special status and supportive provisions when preparing for and giving evidence in adult criminal courts. Some special information is now available for parents and carers of children due to give witness evidence in court, as well as for practitioners. There are also special co-ordinator personnel (for example, child witness officers) and, in some cases, there may also be intermediaries to facilitate communication. Changes can be made to the courtroom environment (e.g. judges and lawyers may remove wigs and gowns), and other measures have also been introduced to enable child witnesses to give their best evidence, either in private or in court (including screens to shield witnesses from the accused, communication aids, video and live television links). Recently, significant issues have been raised in respect of vulnerable victims and witnesses, as well as intimidated victims, in the context of expanding the role of the volunteer appropriate adult (Williams 2000). Both vulnerable and intimidated victims are likely to qualify for an enhanced service under *The Code of Practice for Victims of Crime* (Home Office 2006f).

Concern for victims and witnesses has shaped legislative and policy changes over the last 30 years. Criticisms of police interviewing and training and an inquisitorial style of cross-examination in the courts, as well as controversy surrounding the inter-agency child protection 'policing' function more generally, have all contributed towards changing methods of investigating, evidencing and prosecuting in child abuse cases. Specific changes have been brought about following serious case reviews and inquiries. Following Jasmine Beckford's death, this included pressure on the police to introduce more sympathetic means of dealing with child victims. Following 'Cleveland' in 1987, the report (Butler-Sloss 1988) made a

number of detailed recommendations, including procedures for the joint investigation of child abuse cases by police officers and social workers, the joint training of police and social workers, new interviewing techniques and a network of communication between all the involved agencies.

Over the last 30 or so years there have been over 40 major inquiries, with an estimated 90 serious case reviews per year (Redner and Duncan 2004), yet the Beckford and Cleveland cases, clearly illustrate several marked differences. There are contrasts in the type of child abuse. In the former, physical abuse and neglect were seriously overlooked whereas in the latter child sexual abuse was uncovered but, in some instances, social workers were over-zealous in their desire to take action to protect the children. Despite parental participation in serious case reviews and major inquiries having become increasingly more common since the early 1990s, many parents still feel they are unfairly labelled as child abusers.

Balancing the rights of parents and the needs of children has been 'a perennial problem for the state throughout the history of child abuse prevention' (Corby 2006: 151). The Victoria Climbié Inquiry (Laming 2003) brought together three earlier, independent statutory inquiries into her death. Lord Laming referred to 'a catalogue of administrative, managerial and professional failure by the services charged with her safety'. While the established approach is to police child abuse through multi-agencyism, the police work to standards of proof that are 'beyond reasonable doubt'. Social services seek to investigate whether child abuse has taken place and whether there is a risk to children. Into the twenty-first century; both these agencies are risk-oriented services, and there continues to be a precarious balance between the rights of children and those suspected of inflicting abuses who, for the most part, tend to be the children's primary carers.

Pamela Davies

Related entries

Crime prevention (situational and social); Domestic violence; Interagency policing; Policing; Repeat victimization; Sexual offences/sexual violence; Victim and witness support.

Key texts and sources

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- Department of Health (1999) *Working Together to Safeguard Children*. London: HMSO (available online at <http://www.doh.gov.uk/quality5.htm>).
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- Williams, J. (2000) 'The inappropriate adult', *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 22: 43–57.
- For general information on child abuse, see the websites of the NSPCC (<http://www.nspcc.org.uk/>) and Childline (<http://www.childline.org.uk/Childabuse.asp>).