

STRESS, EMPATHY AND CHILD ABUSE

By Florence Lieberman, D.S.W.

Poverty and external stress are often emphasized as the primary precipitants of child abuse. Such a perspective does injustice to the complexity of the interactions between parent and child, to the intricacies of human behavior and to the realities of child abuse. Though social, economic and other deprivations influence, develop and exacerbate physical, mental and emotional difficulties, they do not explain sufficiently why some individuals neglect and abuse children, and others in the same situation do not. This paper will develop ideas about stress and empathy as they contribute to the problem.

Stress

Stress is a very complicated concept. Biological, physiological stress reactions have been generalized to psychological reactions. In the physiological sense stress is the nonspecific response of the body to stimuli that increase the demand for readjustment and for performance of those adaptive functions which re-establish normalcy of the body. Stressors disrupt homeostasis in two ways, either by being beyond the power of the organism's adaptability or by causing disease because there is a particular weakness in the structure. Individuals develop different types of diseases under the influence of the same kind of stressor; that is, the same stressor affects different people in different ways and to different degrees. Thus in the case of germs, disease is due neither to the germ as such, nor to adaptive reactions as such, but disease is caused by the inadequacy of reactions against the germ. (Selye, 1980)

Psychological stress is now viewed as a general rubric for somewhat different though related processes of person-environment transactions in which the demands tax or exceed the resources of the person. Coyne and Lazarus (1980) suggest that such stress is neither simply an environmental stimulus, a characteristic of the person, nor a response, but a balance between demands and the power to deal with them without unreasonable destructive costs. It appears that people who have social supports and are exposed to high stress will have much lower levels of symptomatology than will those individuals who lack social support. On the other hand, many persons who are without supports are often so because of their own impairments.

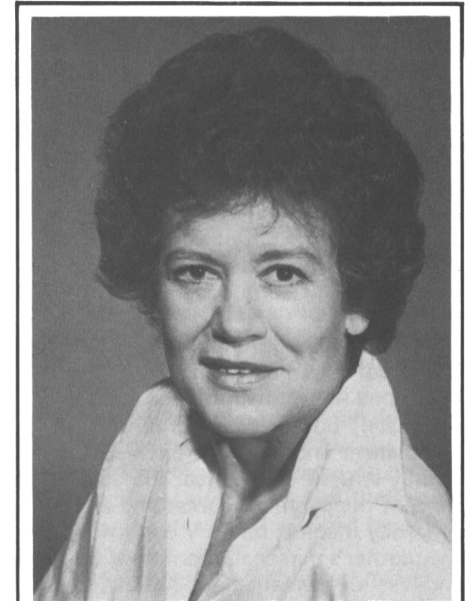
The reaction to psychological stress varies with the individual. Though some

may react by abusing children, wives or others, as many, if not more, react by abusing themselves through a series of self-defeating, self-punitive actions and to a great extent through the development of physical and/or psychological symptoms. Thus, though poverty is an externally imposed stress, not all poor people abuse their children. In fact, most do not. In addition, all poor people are not without social supports; self-help among neighbors has often been noted as one of the strengths within poor communities.

Psychological stress may be caused by problems derived from external problems, internal problems or conflicts and most commonly, a combination of both. The current emphasis in research upon external stress may be related to the seductive nature of such a variable which is obvious, direct and most easily measured. Internal stress is less obvious and, because its effects are indirect, they are not easily measured.

It is generally believed that under-reporting and under-detection, because of a variety of reasons, blur statistics in relation to abuse and social class; child abuse of all sorts occurs in all social classes. Problems in relation to work, careers, geographic mobility, interpersonal difficulties, marital conflicts and psychological problems of various kinds occur regardless of economic or social situation. In addition perception of stress and feelings of being overburdened may exist apart from any noticeable objective stress. Thus a young, middle-class professional woman tended to begin each interview with a sigh, saying "life sucks.". Incidentally, the child of a middle-class family, she experienced physical abuse in her childhood, and witnessed the physical abuse of her mother.

Poverty alone cannot explain the physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children, the neglect and the failure to feed and care for them. If economic stress was the overriding factor, no abuse would occur among middle and upper income families and most poor people would abuse their children. In addition, poverty is never suggested as an explanation of the sexual abuse of children and adolescents. In *Violence Against Children*, (1970). Gil omitted sexual abuse unless it also involved physical force. He explained that the perpetrators of sexual abuse seek sexual self-gratification, whereas physical abusers have intentions to hurt. Neither assumption makes sense because there is an underlying simplistic belief that conscious motives



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dictate these behaviors. "But, I never meant to hurt the child" is probably more true than not.

What is the missing ingredient? Perhaps it is correct that modern day societies are violent and therefore condone the use of physical force against children. But, history suggests that human societies have always been violent and, in addition, infanticide is an old and historic aspect of many different societies (Bloch, 1978; De Mause, 1974). Yet, today, most parents and most individuals do not abuse and mistreat children and adolescents. What differentiates those who do from those who do not?

Is Abuse Normal?

Some professionals have stated that abusing parents are normal, basing this on the finding that the percentage of abusing

parents who hallucinate and have delusions is no greater than that which exists in a non-abusing population. Yet abusing families have been described as isolated, rigid, domineering, impulsive, infantile; they often have poor interpersonal relationships, low self-esteem, an inability to tolerate frustration, high unrealistic expectations of their children and histories that frequently include abuse and rejection. Is this normal? And is this what poverty does?

Parke and Collmer (1975) pose this question: "Why doesn't pain feed-back inhibit abuse?" They conclude that abusive parents are relatively low in empathy and therefore unresponsive to signs of suffering in their victims. In addition many are highly aggressive individuals, who, if angered, may accelerate the intensity of their attacks in response to the sight of pain on the part of the victim. Thus empathy and impulse control are singled out as important variables.

A study of children in a rural Mexican village compared children who had developed severe malnutrition with adequately nourished children from the same village and the same birth cohort. Family structures, physical characteristics of the parents, sources and amount of family income, sanitary conditions and the mother's personal cleanliness, literacy and level of formal education failed to distinguish between families with and without severely malnourished children. They *were* differentiated by the mother's behaviors toward her child; these included overt signs of sensitivity toward the child, response and interest in the child's performance, the response to the child's needs, emotional involvement with the child and the amount of verbal communication and expressions of affection toward the child (Crevioto and Arrieta, 1981).

Another study examined the relationship between empathy and stress as they affected parental aggression (Letourneau and Cyarlene, 1981). A matched group of abusive and non-abusive mothers were compared. Abusive mothers differed significantly from the others in their emotional and maternal responsiveness and their role-taking ability. They were found to be less comforting in response to a child's request for help and comfort and tended to be punitive, rigid and unresponsive to their children's needs. However, there was no evidence that they had experienced more stress, such as poverty, unemployment, or excessive or unwanted children (commonly considered external stressors) or more of any other kind of stress than mothers who were nonabusive.

Empathy

Empathy is defined as both a cognitive and affective process and a complex skill composed of the ability to distinguish among and label the thoughts and feelings

of another, to take the role of another and the ability to become emotionally responsive to another's feelings. Preschool children have been found to be able to achieve accurate empathy concerning simple emotions when the situation the other person was in was familiar to the child and/or the other person was substantially similar to the child. However, accurate understanding of feelings is not usually attained until middle or late childhood; it is in adolescence that a more complicated understanding of emotional states of others becomes possible.

Learning to understand feelings, one's own and another's, is an intricate developmental process, dependent upon interactions with others, particularly empathic, constant, consistent parents. Learning to communicate about feelings is dependent upon the ability to connect affects with words and this is dependent upon others. Though children are born with the capacity for speech, the human environment brings this ego function into fruition. The infantile communication through cries or movements elicit the meeting of needs by empathic, significant others who also play with the children, name objects and speak to them. Children learn what they are taught.

As symbols, words integrate and communicate affects, help translate impulses into secondary thought processes and enable the learning and communication of knowledge. Verbalization delays action and provides time to judge and to experiment mentally with possible actions. Deficiencies in this area frequently result in the predominance of actions and problems of acting out. But, the words that are used with children must be in concordance with the other nonverbal communications that are transmitted over time. Thus the statement of an angry parent, "I'll break your bones if you don't stop!" will mean different things in different families.

Affects are complex phenomena that have both conscious and unconscious aspects; they are pleasurable and unpleasurable. Affects find direct, momentary expression, either physiologically or psychologically. Normally, the crude, either-or emotions of the infant are modified by development, secondary process and the reality principle. As affects are organized and differentiated, new outlets for affective and motor discharge become available (Lieberman, 1981).

Many abusive parents have not acquired the ability to integrate feelings and needs and then to communicate these in words, nor are the crude emotions of their infantile past modified. They tend to be emotionally deprived people, who act out against their children, against others and even against themselves. Many have experienced abuse in their childhoods; more have been deprived of emotional object constancy, availability and empathy.

Fraiberg, Adelson and Shapiro (1975) talk of "ghosts in the nursery" of abusing, neglectful parents who themselves were abused and neglected. Though they may remember what they experienced they cannot connect them with feelings; instead they re-enact their experiences with their own children.

In *Damaged Parents*, Polansky (1981) writes as follows:

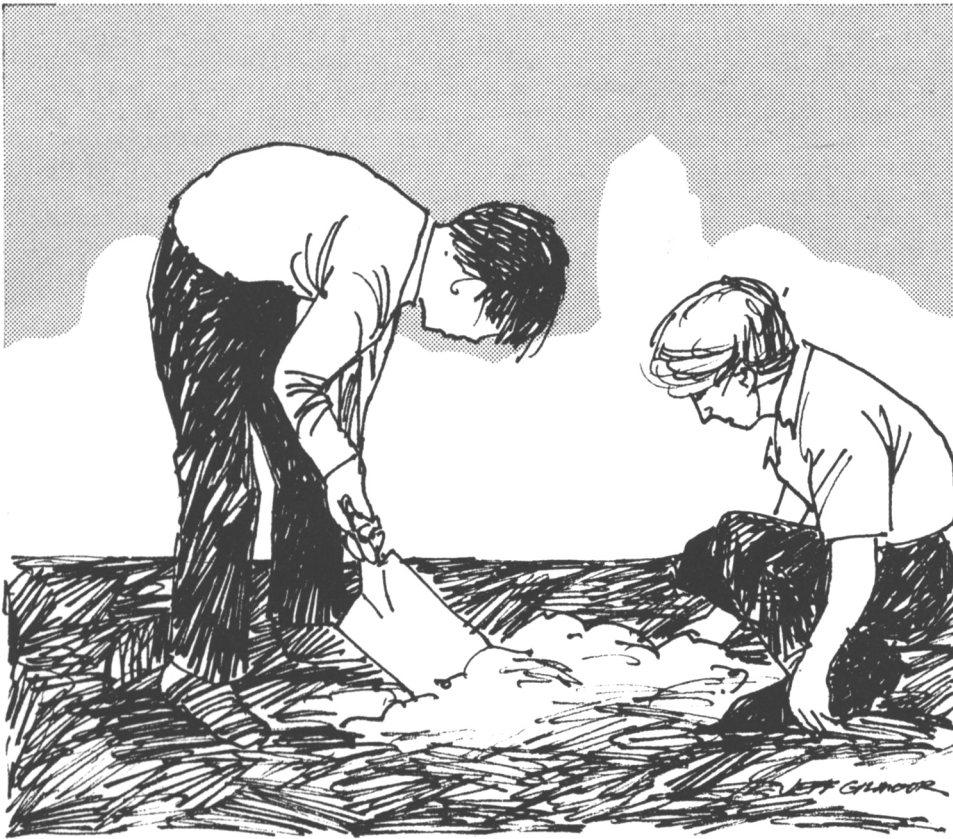
"The massive inhibition of feeling that derives from indifferent and unempathetic mothering amounts to a splitting of the ego. Since the person is unable to be aware of his own hurts and suffering, he is certainly unable to empathize with those of others. Such a person can inflict suffering on other people, then, with a coldness and calculation of which more normal persons would be quite incapable." (p. 7)

Parental problems underlie all non-parental actions toward children. Some parents who mistreat their children seem to be incapable of caring for dependent children because of their own unmet dependent needs. Some never see their children as separate from themselves. Some years ago I worked with the mother of a 14 year old girl. The child was of average height and weight; the mother was obese. Yet she purchased underwear panties for the child of a size to fit herself. This child ran away; this child was involved in sexual acting-out. She did not perform to capacity in any area of life.

There are some parents who cannot tolerate their children's moves toward independence, some view their children as competitors, as bad, seductive, or identify them with other hated and feared individuals. Some over identify with their children. The emergence of sexuality can arouse parental problems about their own sexual impulses and/or their own sexual transgressions, in adolescence or later. Generally, more latency boys than girls are considered problems by their parents or others. In adolescence there is a sharp upturn in the number of girls who are considered problems; frequently this concerns parental fears about the child's real or fantasied sexual activities.

In many cases, parental amnesia about their own adolescence and unresolved problems of an earlier age prevent that empathic understanding of the adolescent's struggles and needs that would enable provision of comfort and psychological support. Instead, the period of the child's adolescence causes traumatic stress for the parent.

Too often the interactions between parent and child have been discussed from the vantage point of the stress for the parent. Thus the victim of child abuse has been said to contribute to the abuse because of physical attributes and defects, personality and behavior. The latter may include withdrawal, indiffer-



ence to the mother and hostile retaliation. These strain a precarious parent-child relationship. However, this is to blame the victim. It explains the stress for the parent; it does not explain the abuse.

Treatment Implications

If one accepts the premise that child abuse and neglect occur because of parental unmet needs and deficiencies in parental emotional development and maturity, the treatment implications are obvious. To begin with, one does not blame the victim, the parents who have suffered life-long deprivation of essential human needs, caring, consideration and empathy for them. Instead one sets as a first task the meeting of their obvious need for caring, consideration and empathy.

Through being empathically understood and cared for, parents may begin to feel; becoming aware of something new, they may begin to be less afraid of feeling and knowing of their long-standing rage at their impotence and the not-caring of others. This means that the therapeutic personnel must be able to empathize with rage, violence and the wish for retaliation but in a manner that enables the putting of the affect into words. Verbalization hurts no-one and yet can help the individual to express symbolically and safely basic feelings. As the social worker is unafraid of expressions through words and indeed facilitates them, the abusing or potentially abusing individual may be enabled to feel the results of the abuse he or she once experienced. Feeling this, through feeling the empathy that is

coming from a more "respectable" and even "authoritarian" person, the individual may begin the process of feeling another's pain. This will be the greatest deterrent to child abuse.

Conclusions

To be effective, recommendations to eliminate child and adolescent abuse need to be considered in an Olympian manner. Less than that will not do. Today, many limitations are being imposed on human social services in the name of reality. If we accept these, we have forsaken a commitment to human welfare. The following are suggested.

1. Poverty should be eliminated through equal opportunity, adequate income, comprehensive health care and social services, decent and adequate housing, comprehensive education and cultural facilities. Meeting basic human needs may not eliminate all child abuse, but, in any case, will remove some of the noxious stresses that no human being should be expected to endure.

2. There should be comprehensive family-planning programs, education and counseling programs for adolescents, comprehensive high quality, neighborhood national health services, and a range of other neighborhood based social, child-welfare and child protective services and a quality system of personal social services.

3. Substantial school breakfasts and lunches should be provided for all children attending school, regardless of economic status. This would remove the effect of one type of child neglect.

4. All adolescents should be drafted for a health and community service at age 18. As they are accepted into national service, all of their defects should be attended to, including a review of educational deficits and health problems.

5. There should be early intervention in the interest of any child who shows any evidence of failure to thrive physically, emotionally and educationally.

6. Physical force should be prohibited as a means of rearing and educating children. But, laws alone will not accomplish the task.

7. Time, effort and the most skilled personnel should be provided for the treatment of parents who abuse their children or seem to have the potential to do so. It takes time and skill to develop the trusting relationships necessary to promote the development of emotionally and developmentally arrested adults, those who abuse their children. In line with this we need to reconsider the over-use of brief interventions with families who abuse their children. Brief work may be cheap work; in the long run, cheap is dear.

8. No individual client or family should be subjected to an array of helping persons. Development depends upon constancy and continuity. No therapeutic work can be successful without these two principles.

9. We need to build a society that respects all its people and cherishes all its young, regardless of class, caste, race and other characteristics. It should be a society dedicated to helping its citizens of all ages to learn to work, to live, to love and to produce productively.

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