

It Shouldn't Hurt To Be a Child

By John Patterson

Leaders of organizations serving youth from throughout the United States gathered in Dallas last September for a national child abuse-prevention symposium that bore the theme "Securing the Future."

Convened by the BSA with 14 co-sponsors, the symposium was the first of its kinds, bringing together representatives from schools, churches, and other youth-serving organizations. These delegates examined the ways child abuse affects children and families affiliated with their programs as well as how child abuse impacts the organizations and their leaderships.

In his opening remarks, Chief Scout Executive Jere Ratcliffe said that the purpose of the symposium was "to provide us with the information we need so that when we return home to our responsibilities we will be better prepared to take steps to secure the future for those young people whose lives we influence..."

He challenged participants to follow through on a three-step program:

"First, we must take aggressive steps to ensure that our youth programs remain safe and secure for the children who participate. Second, we must prepare the children to protect themselves from those who would abuse them in the community. And last, we must find better ways to strengthen families so that every child may enjoy the benefits of a safe and secure home."

In her keynote address, the Rev. Margaret Graham, associate rector of St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., pointed out the complexities of child abuse. She advocated the need for better role models for children and criticized the violence depicted on television as a contributing factor to child abuse.

Ann Donnelly, executive director of the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, also

spoke at the opening session. She provided proven strategies for reducing child abuse by strengthening families, teaching parenting skills, and creating community-wide concern for the well-being of children.

Report of a BSA-funded study

David Finkelhor, co-director of the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire, reported on the findings of a three-year study commissioned by the BSA to examine the effectiveness of child-abuse prevention programs.

The study involved telephone interviews (with parental permission) of a nationally-representative sample of 2,000 children, 10 to 16 years of age, to determine if the children had been given any education pertaining to child-abuse prevention.

Findings revealed that:

- A large majority of American young people had been exposed to a school-based sexual abuse or victimization prevention program.
- Over a third had been exposed to such a program within the last year.
- Both children and their parents had generally positive reactions to these programs.
- Many children remembered specific instances of utilizing the knowledge or skills they had learned.

It was clear from the study that when parents reinforce the child-abuse prevention program at home, the children are more likely to use the concepts they were taught. [Note: How to Protect Your Children from Child Abuse and Drug Abuse: A Parent's Guide, found in the front of every Boy Scout, Cub Scout, and leader's handbook, is an excellent resource to use when discussing this subject with youth.]

An extensive selection of workshops

Symposium participants took part in a diverse choice of workshops addressing general child-abuse issues. Here are some highlights from a cross-section of those sessions:

Cordelia Anderson, a Minneapolis Minn., authority on child abuse in sports, in her workshop "To Touch or Not to Touch" pointed out that "a lot of [books and magazine articles] coming out to help people are very fear based."

As a result, organizations are instituting "no-touch" policies which may, in fact, be destructive to

children. She pointed to studies of primitive societies that contrasted high levels of violence when the levels of physical affection of infants were low, with low levels of violence when physical levels of affection were high.

Anderson stated, "In our effort to come up with quick-fix solutions that are going to protect us all as adults, we don't think about the potential damage that we are doing to children. There are plenty of studies about the importance of healing, nurturing touch."

Organizations should have guidelines that define the boundaries for physical interaction with children that recognize the differences between exploitive touching and healthy touching that children need.

Barbara Bonner, director of the Center of Child Abuse and Neglect, presented a workshop on "The Effects of Sexual Abuse on Children." She indicated that a number of factors determine what the effects of child sexual abuse are, but these factors may vary from child to child.

Since most children are not evaluated prior to the abuse, it is hard to separate the effects of sexual abuse from other factors that influence psycho-social development, such as chaotic family life, divorce, and other conditions in existence before the abuse occurred.

Some signs of sexual abuse include sleeping disorders, avoidance of the abuser, depression, substance abuse, and high levels of fearfulness. Other children may be so desensitized that they are virtually nonresponsive. A single behavior is not a reliable sign of child sexual abuse. However, if a child persistently talks about sex inappropriately, sexual abuse may be involved.

Susan Phipps-Yonas, a psychologist from Minneapolis, in a "Sexual Abuse Disclosure and False Accusations" workshop, pointed out that, "There are a lot of questions being raised about the credibility of children in allegations of sexual abuse."

She used several scenarios to illustrate the complexities involved in determining the credibility of sexual-abuse allegations.

"It is more the exception than the rule that young children will disclose sexual abuse directly," she said. Most often, the child will start by saying that "I don't like so-and-so." Or the disclosure process begins by an alert adult noticing that the child is acting differently than normal.

The old axiom that "children don't lie" is most able to be disproved by the fact that children will deny that abuse happened when, in fact, it did. The disclosure process usually begins by revealing the least bad parts first and, as belief is established, more of the story. Credibility increases as the child understands the details of the abuse and is consistent about what happened.

Joyce Thomas, director of the People of Color Leadership Institute, led a workshop on "Cultural Perspectives and Child-Abuse Prevention." She pointed out that in a multicultural society "family structures are likely to be different, family supports are likely to be different, [and] family needs are likely to be different."

It is important that youth-serving organizations take steps to understand the nature of these differences. As an example, to accommodate this difference many of the BSA youth protection materials are available in Spanish.

Deborah Daro, director of research for the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, conducted a workshop on "Child Safety Curriculum Standards." She pointed out that the way our nation has addressed child sexual abuse is different from how it has addressed other forms of abuse—the focus in sexual-abuse prevention has been more on the victim than on the perpetrator.

Physical-abuse prevention programs are very broad, focusing more on the entire family than on the child, seeking to change parental behavior. In cases of sexual-abuse prevention, studies indicate that parents want their children to be educated about prevention, but many feel uncomfortable about talking with their children about this form of abuse.

Awareness of the occurrence of sexual abuse has increased so that in 1967 there were 7,000 reported cases of child sexual abuse; in 1992 there were 460,000 reported cases.

Dr. David Chadwick, director of the Center for Protection at Children's Hospital in San Diego, Calif., presented a workshop relating societal values to the occurrence of child abuse. Dr. Chadwick advanced his thesis that "as a society it is hard to say that we are practicing what we preach." Parents feel proprietary about their children and do not like others to tell them what to do.

Dr. Chadwick stated that the mobility of today's society and the resulting loss of a sense of "neighborhood" has produced a lack of community involvement in the raising of children.

Some things that Dr. Chadwick suggested that governments and communities might do to help prevent family violence include: avoiding premature parenthood; having child care at the work site; providing better parent training and leave to give mom and dad some time to get to know the infant and form lasting lifetime bonds; developing adequate services at schools and other places where children are; and teaching children how to avoid abuse.

Dr. Chadwick cited the BSA's Youth Protection emphasis as exemplary and said that the videotapes "A Time to Tell" and "It Happened to Me" were excellent examples of materials

designed to empower children to prevent sexual abuse. [Note: "A Time to Tell" is available for use by troop leaders to inform their Boy Scouts about child sexual abuse prevention. "It Happened to Me" is produced for Cub Scout-age boys. Both are available from local council service centers.]

Other workshops examined the different approaches used by organizations in their child-abuse prevention programs. Sheriff Johnnie Klevenhagen, an executive board member of the Sam Houston Area Council, explained how the BSA has become the child-abuse prevention resource for Houston, Tex., providing training for 6,000 non-Scouters and more than 3,000 Scouting volunteers.

Dr. Harriet Mosatche, from the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A., described the programs of the Girl Scouts' child-abuse prevention booklet, *Staying Safe*. This is part of their Contemporary Issues series dealing with topics such as drug abuse, pregnancy prevention, and youth suicide as well as child-abuse prevention. Linda Long, from Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America, described EMPOWER, that organization's child sexual-abuse education and prevention program, used with staff, volunteers, parents, and children.

Background checks: panacea or placebo?

One of the most perplexing issues facing organizations serving youth is identifying reasonable techniques for screening their leadership so that individuals with a propensity for abusing children are denied the opportunity.

U.S. Representative Patricia Schroeder (D-Colo.) addressed the symposium via live satellite hookup from Washington, D.C. Representative Schroeder has a long history as an advocate for children. She discussed pending legislation that would enable FBI criminal history files to be used for screening individuals who work with children so that those convicted of crimes against children could be identified.

Panelists addressed questions about how the proposed legislation would affect churches and how volunteers would be impacted by the law. Representative Schroeder said that churches should be helped just as other childcaring agencies would be. She further indicated that this legislation shouldn't interfere with the performance of volunteer work.

A closing challenge

Patricia Schene, director for the American Humane Association's Children's Division, delivered the closing address. Dr. Schene stated, "Children and youth-serving organizations in our country

have a vital role to play in society's commitment to respond effectively to child abuse and neglect through not only prevention, but also identification of children needing our help . . ."

Dr. Schene stated that we cannot as a nation give up on our children, but it has become abundantly clear that we are not adequately protecting and nurturing them.

Some 24 percent of our children live in poverty, and 25 percent do not graduate from high school. A large percentage of children find it more attractive to belong to a gang than to the greater society.

Noting that we all have a responsibility to care for the children, Schene recalled the old African saying: "It takes a village to raise a child."

Symposium Co-Sponsors

Besides the BSA, the "Securing the Future" symposium was sponsored by the following organizations: National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse; Southern Baptist Convention-Sunday School Board & Christian Life Commission; National Association of Elementary School Principals; YMCA of the U.S.A.; Children's Trust Fund of Texas; American Humane Association Children's Division; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; National Catholic Educators Association; C. Henry Kempe Center for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect; American Association of School Administrators; Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); Big Brothers/Big Sisters; Center for Child Protection at Children's Hospital and Health Center, San Diego, Calif.; American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children.

Audiotapes Available

The proceedings of "Securing the Future: A National Child Abuse-Prevention Symposium for Organizations Serving Children and Youth" were recorded on audio tape. Contact Larry Potts, director, Administrative Group, Boy Scouts of America, 1325 W. Walnut Hill Ln., P.O. Box 152079, Irving, Tex. 75015-2079, for a listing of tapes and price information.

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