

PREVENTION OF CHILD ABUSE

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PARENTS MUST BE ENCOURAGED TO RESORT TO UPBRINGING AND EDUCATIONAL METHODS FOSTERING SELF-ESTEEM IN CHILDREN

Children are major historical victims. Since time immemorial, children have been physically traumatized, subjected to sexual abuse and even deprived of their most basic needs. These events of child abuse, silenced until not too long ago, have become tragically evident as of late. Every day, we come to know that girls and boys from all social classes are the object of emotional, physical or sexual abuse at the very heart of a dysfunctional family structure, or outside. The magnitude of this problem is evidenced in the alarming number of cases arriving at hospitals, the countless reports to courts and the never-ending calls to first-aid centers. Furthermore, we know that only the most severe cases are brought to light, while the best part of them remains anonymous. Child abuse is any damage inflicted upon a child, in a manner other than accidentally, by a person who is older, stronger and having greater authority than the child, and with whom the child may be acquainted or not. (We will speak of neglect, however, when damage is the result of carelessness or lack of diligence). What we call child abuse, generally speaking, includes physical violence (beating, injuring, burning, etcetera), emotional maltreatment (actions against self-esteem such as disparaging, shouting, insulting) and sexual abuse itself, which involves having the child participate in activities of a sexual nature (which the child may not understand, for which the child is not mature enough) which violate social and legal rules.

EMOTIONAL COSTS

These activities, which always entail emotional maltreatment and in many cases also physical violence, cover a series of behaviors ranging from intentional fondling to penetration by the adult; adults may also abuse the minor without any physical contact. Abuse causes physical and emotional disorders in children, and it blocks normal development to perform in life. Even if the child does not record this as harmful, it is always a traumatic fact and it brings about greater or lesser disruptions in the child's and adolescents psychophysical development. Many of these disruptions surface only during adulthood. Disorders may manifest themselves in different areas: learning (concentration or comprehension difficulties), behavior (major inhibition or aggressiveness), sexuality (extreme inhibition or premature erotization), psychosomatic (sleep and eating disorders), body (blows, lesions). And from the social point of view, we may speak of school drop-out and failure, crime, prostitution, disabling diseases. What we do to children affects society as well. The prevention of child abuse should be a matter of concern for every member in the community. Therefore, we must consider -without delay- primary prevention that is, attacking the "disease" before the onset. In addition to developing and coordinating resources for children and families in need (with laws that allow intervention and centers to resort to), we must confront the problem before it happens. Late reactions are very expensive, not only in terms of money but also emotionally.

TEACH THEM HOW TO PROTECT THEMSELVES

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been an integral part of our Constitution since 1994, certifies children are the subjects of rights and that they are entitled to the right, among others, to be understood and loved by their parents and by society; to the right to special protection for their physical, emotional and social development; to the right to be protected against destitution, labor exploitation and

sexual, physical or emotional abuse; the right to obtain information to promote their well-being. For all of the above, drafting a child abuse prevention program is urgent. This plan should promote the self-protection capacity in children, a capacity that they may develop themselves to prevent or reduce physical, emotional and sexual risks and which essential pillars are developing self-esteem and learning self-protection rules. His preventive task must be carried out in two environments -family and institutions. From the moment the child is born, parents play a decisive role. The family must let the child achieve his/her fullest development as an individual. It is essential to encourage parents to resort to upbringing and educational methods fostering self-esteem in children. In addition to the family, during the kindergarten, pre-school and primary school period, educational and other institutions have a very important function too. During this stage, the child is exposed to new situations which occur not only in the family context but also in the outside world. Some of them may be dangerous, others may be confusing, but in every case children must be prepared to prevent interactions that may alter their normal psychophysical development. It is important to use simple methods to teach them strategies that will help them stay away from physical, emotional and sexual risks -such as they are taught how to avoid risky situations in general- taking into account that they will only learn to look after themselves if they feel valuable and loved. Abuse and neglect bring about diseases that leave severe sequelae in the psyche and the body. Science permanently struggles to find solutions against disease. Likewise, society should right away find the way to deal with the complex and tragic issue of child abuse. To do so, we must start by fighting against the rules of silence around it. The more the community gets acquainted with the existence of abuse and its severe consequences as a much more widespread and much more harmful phenomenon than we may suspect, the greater the possibility to face up to abuse with preventive methods.