

Press Release **(16.11.2017)**

“Protect Our Children for their Optimal Development”

Today, the Against Child Abuse (ACA) held a press conference to report on significant events and statistics of its work for the year 2016/17 and to share concerns and recommendations for child protection.

With the support of our collaborative partner, Save the Children Hong Kong, the ACA carried out the Parent-child Support Line Services for parents and children to share difficulties in communication and to seek help whenever needed. A total of 1,121 cases were handled by our hotline and drop-in services in the year 2016/17, 198 (18%) were suspected child abuse cases.

Nearly half of the callers were family members

Of the 1,121 hotline calls, 617 (55%) were reported by family members. Of the 617 family members, 399 (65%) were children's mothers, 99 (16%) were fathers, 75 (12%) were relatives or friends, 44 (7%) were the abused children themselves. There were 3 abusers who reported the cases themselves and sought help from ACA. Some parents were ready to seek help. Relatives and friends also played an important role in protecting children. Of the 1,121 hotline calls, 303 (27%) calls were made by the public or neighbours, which was the second largest group of referrers followed by 190 (17%) professionals and 8 (1%) by the media. All parties play an important role in protecting children at risk of abuse.

Majority of the suspected abused children were aged 3 to 8

Of the 225 children involved in the 198 suspected child abuse cases, 61 (27%) were 6 to 8 years old, 59 (26%) from 3 to 5 years old, and 22 (10%) were aged 2 or below. The figures indicated that the age ranging from 3 to 8 was the most vulnerable group. This range covered the pre-school age and primary school period. Not only children studying in primary school are most vulnerable to being abused, but also children of younger age. Owing to the competitive education system, both parents and children begin to feel stressful even at the kindergarten stage. Children



advancing from kindergartens to primary schools require more adjustment to the studying mode in primary schools. During this transition stage, their academic performance may not be able to meet the school expectation. Parents also need to help their children to adjust to their stressful study environment. Abuse can cause permanent physical harm, psychological damage and can be fatal. Therefore, early prevention to support parents with newborn babies and young children is urgently needed.

Over 60% suspected abusers were family members

There were 228 suspected abusers in the 198 suspected child abuse cases. Of the 228 suspected abusers, 144 (63%) were family members, including 60 (27%) mothers, 46 (20%) fathers, 30 (13%) of both parent, 5 (2%) grandmothers, 2 (1%) grandfathers and one adoptive parent. Abused children lose trust in the family members who are abusers. They may experience fear, depression and become withdrawn. They would also feel insecure, lack of confidence and have low self-esteem and self-doubt. Parents should learn positive parenting and ensure that their children grow and develop in a safe and happy family.

Over 50% were physical abuse

Of the 198 suspected child abuse cases, 105 cases (53%) involved physical abuse, which ranked the highest in number. The second highest was sexual abuse, 36 (18%); followed by neglect cases, 28 cases (14%); multiple abuse, 19 cases (10%) and psychological abuse, 10 cases (5%). Physical abuse not only harms the child's body, but also affects the child's self-control and mental ability, and the outcome of parent-child relationship would be poor. Corporal punishment is a form of violence that should be totally banned.

Child sexual abuse cases has been increased

Of the 198 suspected child abuse cases, 36 (18%) were child sexual abuse cases. It has been increased 20% in comparison with 30 cases last year. Child sexual abuse trauma causes deep hurt and negative impact on the life of a child. It requires in-depth treatment for the child to re-integrate life and rebuild relationship with family members. To prevent child sexual abuse, comprehensive sex education should be provided for children. Parents should also learn to provide sex education for their children at home.



14% were child neglect cases

Of the 198 suspected child abuse cases, 28 (14%) were neglect cases. Of the 28 neglect cases, nearly half of the cases (12 cases) had been left unattended at home. Leaving children unattended at home is very dangerous, it can be fatal. Parents and carers may have to face criminal liability arising from negligence in child care.

Psychological abuse should not be underestimated

Of the 198 suspected child abuse cases, 10 (5%) were child psychological abuse. Some children may experience psychological abuse only, without ever experiencing another form of abuse. However, each form of abuse causes psychological damage to children. The low reporting rate does not mean that the situation is not serious. Psychological abuse that exists independently of other forms of abuse is the most difficult form of abuse to identify. Psychological abuse is the repeated pattern of behaviour and attitude towards a child or an extreme incident that endangers or impairs the child's emotional or intellectual development. Acts of spurning, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting/ corrupting, denying emotional responsiveness, conveying to a child that he/she is worthless, flawed, unwanted or unloved. Such acts damage the behavioural, cognitive, affective, or physical functioning of the child.

Recommendations:

1. To provide resources for early prevention services, such as home visitation services for families with newborn babies to support new parents to learn positive parenting and home safety knowledge.
2. To provide supporting services for at risk groups, such as families in poverty, single/young mothers, new arrival families with young children, caregivers with emotional problems, substance abusing parents or caregivers, etc.
3. To use non-violent ways to manage children. Corporal punishment is a form of violence and should be totally banned, including at home.
4. To provide systematic parent education programmes so that parents can learn ways to handle stress and emotions and to understand the developmental needs of children in different ages.

5. To set up a mandatory Sex Conviction Record Check System and a mandatory treatment program for sex offenders, to carry out comprehensive sex education and to prevent child sexual abuse incidents.
6. To review the law on leaving children unattended, increase child care services and promote parent education to enhance parents' home safety awareness.
7. To set up a clear legislation for child psychological abuse, to promote public awareness in identification of child psychological abuse, and to facilitate multi-disciplinary cooperation in dealing with psychological abuse cases.
8. To concern about the psychological impact on children witness of domestic violence, provide appropriate counseling or treatment services for them.
9. To strengthen and monitor the follow-up services after multi-disciplinary case conferences (MDCC) on child abuse and provide in-depth therapeutic services for the abused children and abusers.
10. The establishment of the Children's Commission in mid-2018 should refer to the framework mentioned in the "Paris Principles" and be responsible to integrate data, review the legislation and policies, conduct child impact assessment and work in the spirit of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It should also aim at setting targets to protect the children in Hong Kong by allowing them the right to participate in their own development.
11. To develop a central data bank to centralize, collect, analyze and disseminate related information on child protection and child development.
12. To provide resources for research on the prevalence, trend and characteristics of child abuse and explore directions and strategies to prevent violence against children.
13. To develop children's developmental policies, set indicators and review the effectiveness.

Service user's sharing

Ms. Tze is a single mother who has a 4-month-old child to look after. During her pregnancy, she was referred by the hospital to ACA Daylily Project for Young/ Single Mothers for depression. The Project provided her emotional support, ways of positive parenting and referrals of social resources.

When pregnant, Ms. Tze was living alone in a subdivided flat of about 60 feet. She had a stable job and her life was simple. After the child was born, she quitted the job and became a full-time mother. She faced various difficulties and pressures, including economic, housing and health problems. Without any support from relatives and friends, she felt lonely and despair. Her life was changed until project volunteers visited her and offered emotional support and life assistance.

Ms. Tze told the volunteers that there were lice and mosquitoes in the home. In addition to the narrow space and non-circulating air, it was not suitable for the child to live. Thus volunteers suggested her to find another place and helped her move to the new home. It made Ms. Tze feel hopeful in the despair of life. Furthermore, the volunteers gave her a lot of support and encouragement through regular home visits and phone calls. She also thanks the project social worker for caring for her family and helping her to solve financial difficulties. She sincerely hopes that she will become a volunteer in the future and send love to other single families in need.

Ms. Tze thanks ACA and the project volunteers for all the support and encouragement. She appeals to the needy single mothers not to give up, to be courageous in seeking assistance in times of difficulty.

Protect Our Children for their Optimal Development. We appeal to all of you to report suspected child abuse cases and encourage parents and children to seek help at an early stage of risk.

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