

Press Release **(20.11.2018)**

“Protect Our Children for their Optimal Development”

Today is the Universal Children’s Day, the Against Child Abuse (ACA) held a press conference to report on significant events and statistics of its work for the year 2017/18 and to share concerns and recommendations for child protection. The ACA provides child protection, counselling, prevention and advocacy services.

With the support of our collaborative partner, Save the Children Hong Kong, the ACA carried out the Parent-child Support Line Services to provide a channel for the public to report suspected child abuse and for parents and children to share difficulties in communication and to seek help whenever needed. A total of 1,289 cases were handled by our hotline and drop-in services in the year 2017/18, 214 (17%) were suspected child abuse cases.

More than 60% of the callers were family members

Of the 1,289 hotline calls, 803 (62%) were reported by family members. Of the 803 family members, 612 (76%) were children's mothers, 82 (10%) were fathers, 69 (9%) were relatives or friends, 40 (5%) were the abused children themselves. There were 9 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 1,289 hotline calls, 283 (22%) calls were made by the public or neighbours, which was the second largest group of referrers followed by 182 (14%) professionals and 12 (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 258 children involved in the 214 suspected child abuse cases, 68 (26%) were 3 to 5 years old, 67 (26%) from 6 to 8 years old, and 43 (17 %) were 9 to 11 years old. The figures indicated that the age ranging from 3 to 11 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 and from primary schools to secondary schools require more adjustment to the new learning environment and studying mode. During these transition stages, parents face pressure to choose schools for their children, and they are worried that their children's academic performance will not meet the school requirements, which will lead to high expectations for their children and easily cause parent-child conflict. Parents need to help their children to adjust to their stressful study environment. They also need to take care of their own emotions and seek ways to relieve stress. Abuse can cause permanent physical harm, psychological damage and can be fatal. Therefore, early preventive education and support for parents are urgently needed.

Over 70% suspected abusers were family members

There were 242 suspected abusers in the 214 suspected child abuse cases. Of the 242 suspected abusers, 183 (76%) were family members, including 83 (34%) mothers, 48 (20%) fathers, 28 (12%) of both parent, 12 (5%) grandmothers, 7 (3%) stepfathers, 2 (1%) grandfathers, 2 (1%) adoptive parent and one stepmother. 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 knowledge and skills in positive parenting, and ensure that their children grow and develop in a safe and happy family.

Over 60% were physical abuse

Of the 214 suspected child abuse cases, 131 cases (61%) involved physical abuse, which ranked the highest in number. The second highest was neglect cases, 25 (12%); followed by psychological abuse, 20 cases (9%); multiple abuse, 19 cases (9%) and sexual abuse, 19 cases (9%). 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.

12% were child neglect cases

Of the 214 suspected child abuse cases, 25 (12%) were neglect cases. Of the 25 neglect cases, 10 cases had been left unattended at home and 10 cases with inadequate physical care (food, clothing, shelter, etc.). Among the 25 neglect cases, 5 (20%) were related to the suspected abusers' undesirable hobbies (e.g. gambling, indulgence in alcohol, substance abuse etc.). Undesirable hobbies weaken the ability of parents and care givers to take care of their children, while leaving children in a hidden crisis which may have a profound impact on them. Leaving children unattended at home is very dangerous, it can be fatal. Parents and care givers may have to face criminal liability arising from negligence in child care.

Double the number of cases of Psychological Abuse

Of the 214 suspected child abuse cases, 20 (9%) were child psychological abuse, the number was double that of last year's 10 cases. 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. 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. Some children may experience psychological abuse only, without ever experiencing another form of abuse. However, each form of abuse causes psychological damage to children.

Sexual abuse cases should not be ignored

Of the 214 suspected child abuse cases, 19 (9%) were child sexual abuse cases. 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 by school for children. Parents should also learn to provide sex education for their children at home.

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, children with special education needs and their parents/care givers, parents/care givers with emotional problems or substance abuse, 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 carry out 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 stages.
5. To set up a mandatory Sex Conviction Record Check System and a mandatory treatment programme for sex offenders, to carry out comprehensive sex education so as 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 Commission on Children needs to work in the spirit of the 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' and practice its functions, ensure that children's voices are heard and opinions are respected during the policy making process, review the legislation and policies, conduct child impact assessment, set targets and review the effectiveness. It should also aim at protecting 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 promote child protection policy in the community to create a safe and friendly environment for children.

Service user's sharing

When Yi was pregnant, she was referred to the Against Child Abuse by the United Christian Hospital because of her depression. After participating in the Daylily Project, her capacity and confidence to care for her son was enhanced. After the visitation service, she was all well in taking care of her son. However, as the son grew up, the problems she faced began to increase. She began to get nervous and she participated in the project again.

Yi's son has a genetic disease and has always been very obese. As the son was often teased and criticized by others, Yi felt stressful. Furthermore, as a single mother, Yi felt difficult to take care of her son alone, so Yi often beat and scolded the son. She even had suicidal thought. Fortunately, with the help of project social worker and volunteers, Yi's emotion began to improve.

Yi actively participated in the parent education talks and parent-child activities provided by the project. Through home visits by social worker and volunteers, and sharing positive parenting and rearing experience with Yi, her parenting capacity had improved and her emotion had been supported. She and her son became more confident and happier than before. Now Yi wants her son to study and live happily. She will do her best to take care of her son and meet his growth needs.

Yi thanks the project volunteers and social worker for all the support and encouragement. She appeals to the needy single mothers to be courageous in seeking assistance in times of difficulty.



Against Child Abuse

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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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