

Patron : Prof. Ian Grenville Cross
SBS, QC, SC



童心同行 40年

贊助人 : 江樂士教授
SBS, QC, SC

13/F, Corn Yan Centre, 3 Jupiter Street, North Point, Hong Kong.
香港北角木星街3號澤盈中心13樓
Tel: (852) 3542 5722 Hotline: (852) 2755 1122 Fax: (852) 3542 5709
E-mail: aca@aca.org.hk Home Page: <http://www.aca.org.hk>

Chairperson : Dr. Patrick Cheung
主席 : 張志雄醫生
Director : Ms. Donna Wong
總幹事 : 黃翠玲女士

Press Release

Protect Children for Optimal Development

20th November 2019

Today is the Universal Children's Day, the Against Child Abuse (ACA) held the 40th press conference to report on significant services and statistics of its work for the year 2018/19 and to share concerns and recommendations for child protection. The ACA provides prevention, child protection, counseling and advocacy services.

With the continuous 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, parenting, child growth and development, and to seek help whenever needed. A total of 1,244 cases were handled by our hotline and drop-in services in the year 2018/19, 211 (17%) were suspected child abuse cases.

More than 60% of the callers were family members

Of the 1,244 hotline calls, 799 (64%) were reported by family members. Of the 799 family members, 552 (69%) were mothers, 129 (16%) were fathers, 95 (12%) were relatives or friends, 23 (3%) were the abused children themselves. There were 3 suspected abusers who reported the cases themselves and sought help.

The figures showed that some parents were willing to seek help from ACA when they had difficulties in parenting. Relatives and friends also played an important role in protecting children. Of the 1,244 hotline calls, 229 (19%) calls were referred by professionals, which was the second largest group of referrers, followed by 208 (17%) the public or neighbours and 4 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 246 children involved in the 211 suspected child abuse cases, 70 (28%) were 3 to 5 years old, 56 (23%) from 6 to 8 years old, and 38 (16%) were 9 to 11 years old. The figures indicated that the most vulnerable group was the age ranging from 3 to 11, this range covered the pre-school and primary school period.

The current education system is highly competitive, both parents and children may feel stressful even at the kindergarten stage, especially the double-income parents with long working hours. Children advancing from kindergartens to primary schools and from primary schools to secondary schools

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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 the academic performance of their children will not meet the school requirements, which will lead to excessive expectations for their children and easily cause parent-child conflicts. Abuse can affect children's physical and psychological development and even have serious consequences. Therefore, parents need to care for their children and help them handle their emotions and adjust to their stressful study environment. Parents also need to take care of their own emotions and seek ways to relieve stress. Early preventive education, supporting families in crisis and enhancing positive parenting skills are urgently needed.

Nearly 80% suspected abusers were family members

There were 262 suspected abusers in the 211 suspected child abuse cases. Of the 262 suspected abusers, 207 (79%) were family members, including 77 (29%) mothers, 54 (21%) parents, 49 (19%) fathers, 13(5%) grandmothers, 6(2%) sisters, 5 (2%) stepfathers, and 3 (1%) grandfathers.

Abused children lose trust in the abusive family members; they may also experience fear, depression and become withdrawn. The most far-reaching impact is the lack of security, resulting in low self-confidence and self image, doubts about their own values, low level of trust in people and even obstacles in interpersonal relationship. Family is an important place for children to grow and develop themselves, and parents are the closest family members of children. Thus parents should be supported to learn the knowledge and skills of positive parenting for children to grow in a safe and happy family.

Over 50% were physical abuse

Of the 211 suspected child abuse cases, 112 cases (53%) involved physical abuse, which ranked the highest in number. The second highest was multiple abuse, 29 cases (14%); followed by psychological abuse, 28 cases (13%); sexual abuse, 24 cases (11%) and neglect cases, 18 (9%).

Corporal punishment is often mistakenly perceived as a way of discipline to control and improve children's misbehavior. In fact, it not only alienates parent-child relationship, children also learn to resolve problems by violence. It is more serious enough to cause injury or even death of children. We should deal with children's emotions and behaviors in a positive and non-violent way. Corporal punishment violates children rights and is a form of violence that should be totally banned.

Multiple abuse cases rose by 50%

Of the 211 suspected child abuse cases, 29 (14%) involved multiple abuse cases. The figure was 50% higher than the 19 cases last year. Among them, 22 cases involved physical abuse and psychological

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abuse.

According to our experience in dealing with cases, physical abuse begins with mild corporal punishment which often escalates unconsciously and causes physical abuse to children. In the process of corporal punishment, mostly accompanied by scold and humiliating words, it brings a negative psychological impact on children's growth. Therefore, in addition to enhancing positive parenting skills, the society also needs to prepare for a total ban of corporal punishment.

Psychological abuse cases rose by 40%

Of the 211 suspected child abuse cases, 28 (13%) were psychological abuse. The figure was 40% higher than the 20 cases last year.

Psychological abuse includes acts of humiliating, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting, denying emotional responsiveness. These acts convey to a child that he/she is worthless, useless, unwanted or unloved so as to impair the behavioral, cognitive, affective and physical functioning of the child.

The low reporting rate does not mean that the situation is not serious. Child psychological abuse has been neglected because many people do not understand what it is and it is difficult to identify or detect its seriousness, so few reports have been made. However, all forms of abuse cases cause psychological damage to children.

Sexual abuse cases should not be ignored

Of the 211 suspected child abuse cases, 24 (11%) were child sexual abuse cases. The trauma of child sexual abuse causes deep hurt and negative impact on the life of children. It requires in-depth treatment for children to re-integrate life and rebuild relationship with family members. To prevent child sexual abuse, comprehensive sex education should be implemented in schools; parents should also learn to provide sex education for their children at home.

Our recommendations to the Government:

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.

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3. To advocate using 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 for delivering positive 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 revise the Guidelines on Sex Education in Schools and carry out comprehensive sex education so as to prevent child sexual abuse incidents.
6. To explore the feasibility of implementing mandatory reporting of child abuse mechanism by professionals.
7. To review the law on leaving children unattended, increase child care services and promote community education to enhance parents' home safety awareness.
8. 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.
9. To concern about the psychological impacts on children witness of domestic violence and suffered from school bullying, provide appropriate counseling or treatment services for them.
10. 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.
11. 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.
12. To develop a central data bank to centralize, collect, analyze and disseminate related information on child protection and child development.

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13. To provide resources for research on the prevalence, trend and characteristics of child abuse and explore directions and strategies to prevent violence against children.

14. To promote child protection policy in the community to create a safe and friendly environment for children.

Service user's sharing:

Ka is a mother of two daughters, the elder one at thirteen and the younger one at two. She divorced her former husband when the elder daughter was small. Nurturing her daughter then became her main concern. Time flew and her former husband begged her to reunite. After discussing with her elder daughter, she decided to remarry with her former husband. She got pregnant with her younger daughter. Unfortunately, violence against Ka occurred not long after marriage. Ka moved to a shelter with the daughters and decided to divorce again. Being a single mother may sound sorrowful for many but for her, it is a blessing. She felt relaxed after leaving her former husband and focused on rearing her precious daughters.

Even so there are certain difficulties and worries in taking care of the daughters alone. In the middle of pregnancy, Ka worried about her emotional instability and lack of child care skills. She was then referred to Against Child Abuse by the United Christian Hospital to participate in the Daylily Project for Young/Single Mothers. She met Mei-ling, the project volunteer. Mei-ling is an experienced mother so that she could share with Ka child care knowledge and guided her how to understand and take care of her daughters' needs. In addition, Ka attended the centre activities in which she learnt knowledge and skills in child care and applied them to daily life.

Ka thanks the project volunteers and social worker for their help. She appeals to the other single mothers to be courageous in seeking help when needed.

Protect Children for 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.

Enquiries:

Ms. Donna WONG
Director, Against Child Abuse
Tel: 3542 5728 / 9121 4650

Ms. Summer LIN
Funding and Promotion Officer, Against Child Abuse
Tel: 3542 5725 / 6593 2680