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Press Release

Protect Children for Optimal Development

19th November 2020

Today, the Against Child Abuse (ACA) held the 41st press conference to report on significant services and statistics of its work for the year 2019/20 and to share concerns and recommendations for child protection. The ACA provides prevention, child protection, counselling 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 1,142 cases were handled by our hotline and drop-in services in the year 2019/20, 144 (13%) were suspected child abuse cases.

Nearly 70% of the callers were family members

Of the 1,142 hotline calls, 780 (69%) were reported by family members. Of the 780 family members, 573 (73%) were mothers, 98 (13%) were fathers, 67 (9%) were relatives or friends, 42 (5%) were the abused children themselves. There were 8 suspected abusers who reported the cases themselves and sought help.

The figures showed that many parents were willing to seek help from ACA when they had difficulties in parenting. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we received many calls from parents about school closures, child care, conflicts between parent-child and siblings. With the disclosure of serious child abuse cases or death cases in recent years, it has aroused social concern. Of the 1,142 hotline calls, 244 (21%) calls were referred by the public or neighbours, accounting for the second largest group of referrers, followed by 106 (9%) professionals and 3 by the media. Family members, friends and 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 174 children involved in the 144 suspected child abuse cases, 50 (29%) were 3 to 5 years old, 38 (22%) were 6 to 8 years old, 19 (11%) were 0 to 2 years old and 16 (9%) were 9 to 11 years old. The figures indicated that the most vulnerable group was the age ranging from 3 to 8, this range covered the pre-school and primary school period.

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Infants and toddlers aged between 0 and 2 must be completely dependent on their parents or care givers for proper care. If they are not in school, it is more difficult to detect and identify cases of suspected abuse or improper care. Moreover, according to the Child Protection Registry of SWD, in addition to the lack of parenting skills, suspected abusers/abusers involving drug abuse and emotional/mental problems have increased in recent years. The situation is worthy of attention.

In today's society, life and work are under pressure, and the education system is highly competitive. Both parents and children may 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 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.

In addition, since the beginning of 2020, affected by the pandemic, schools have been closed, children and their parents stay at home for a long time, and parents have to take into account the role of teachers, which has intensified 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.

More than 65% of the suspected abusers were family members

There were 165 suspected abusers in the 144 suspected child abuse cases. Of the 165 suspected abusers, 108 (66%) were family members, including 45 (27%) mothers, 25 (15%) fathers, 22 (14%) parents, 10(6%) grandmothers, 5 (3%) grandfathers and 1 (1%) brother.

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

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to grow in a safe and happy family.

Over 40% were physical abuse

Of the 144 suspected child abuse cases, 64 cases (44%) involved physical abuse, which ranked the highest rate. The second highest were sexual abuse and multiple abuse, 23 cases (16%); followed by neglect cases, 19 (13%) and psychological abuse, 15 cases (11%).

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.

Sexual abuse cases still need attention

Of the 144 suspected child abuse cases, 23 (16%) were child sexual abuse cases. In recent years, the cases of suspected offenders/offenders who have used mobile phone or the Internet to communicate with children in order to establish a trustful relationship with them for sexual purposes have increased. According to the Child Protection Registry of SWD, 20% of the newly reported sexual abuse cases involved children getting to know the offenders through the Internet or smart phone apps in 2019. During the pandemic, children have more time to surf the Internet and use smartphone for learning and communication, these crises require attention. 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 interpersonal relationship.

Physical and psychological abuse accounted for the largest number of multiple abuse cases

Of the 144 suspected child abuse cases, 23 (16%) involved multiple abuse cases. Among them, 14 cases involved physical abuse and psychological 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.

Over 10% were neglect cases

Of the 144 suspected child abuse cases, 19 (13%) were neglect cases. Among them, 11 cases were related to inadequate physical care and 6 were children who were left unattended at home.

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The characteristics of the suspected abusers include insufficient parenting skills and emotional/mental problems. These risk factors not only weaken the abilities of parents and care givers to take care of children, but also leave children in a hidden crisis which may have a profound impact on child development. Leaving young children unattended at home is very dangerous and can be fatal. Parents and care givers may have criminal liability arising from child neglect.

Psychological abuse cases should not be ignored

Of the 144 suspected child abuse cases, 15 (11%) were psychological abuse. 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.

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 as early as possible, 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/mental problems or substance abuse, etc.
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, revise the Guidelines on Sex Education in Schools and

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carry out comprehensive sex education, and formulate policies/regulations to regulate internet service providers to ensure the security of online platforms in response to cyber crimes so as to prevent child sexual abuse incidents.

6. To conduct consultation and establish a complete supporting package to implement a mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse for professionals.
7. To face up to the problem of leaving children unattended, increase and promote child care services and facilities, and raise parents' awareness of home safety through community education.
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.
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.

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

Social worker's case sharing

Through referrals from the Paediatrics & Adolescent Medicine and Obstetrics & Gynaecology of the United Christian Hospital, Comprehensive Child Development Service and Integrated Family Service Centres, the Daylily project served 60 young/single mothers in the previous year. More than 60% of the single/young mothers live in public housing or with their own family members, others live in subdivided units. Around 75% of them receive CSSA while the rest have family's support or work. Amongst the project families, nearly one third of children have special education needs ranging from Autism, ADHD to dyslexia. All these trigger more stress to the mothers. The story of one of the families is shared below.

Smile is a single mother with a 2-year-old daughter who is active and smart. They are now living happily together. Smile is proud of her lovely daughter and is always willing to share photos and videos of her daughter with others. Yet, she has walked through valley too.

She broke up with her boyfriend during pregnancy as they had a lot of conflicts. Her emotion was frustrated. She suffered from insomnia which also affected her daily life. Other than facing all kinds of discomfort in pregnancy alone, she was in fear of uncertainties in the future. What worried her the most was being incapable of providing the best growth environment to her daughter. She was then referred to the Against Child Abuse by a social worker from Integrated Family Service Centre and started to participate in Daylily-young/single mother- home visitation programme. She met two volunteers, Regent and Karen, through the programme. In the process, volunteers cared not only the child's growth but also Smile's emotion. They accompanied her to experience many stages of child birth, illness, learning to crawl and walk, and admitting to kindergarten. Though there were difficulties, she did not give up and volunteers were beside her all the way. Now, she faces the difficulties of parenting positively and believes in herself that she can take good care of her daughter.

Smile thanks the project volunteers and social worker for their help. She is now more confident in taking care of her daughter. She appeals to other single mothers to be courageous to seek help when needed. There is always hope.

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童心同行 47年

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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.

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