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## Press Release

### Protect Children for Optimal Development

18<sup>th</sup> November 2021

Today, Against Child Abuse (ACA) held the 42<sup>nd</sup> press conference to report on significant services and statistics of its work for the year 2020/21 and to share concerns and recommendations for child protection. ACA provides prevention, child protection, counselling and therapy, and advocacy services.

With the continuous support of our collaborative partner, Save the Children Hong Kong, 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 1,264 cases were handled by our hotline and drop-in services in the year 2020/21, 200 (16%) were suspected child abuse cases.

#### **Over 75% of the callers were family members**

Of the 1,264 hotline calls, 951 (76%) were reported by family members. Of the 951 family members, 782 (82%) were mothers, 92 (10%) were fathers, 57 (6%) were relatives or friends, 20 (2%) were the abused children themselves. There were 4 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 learning problems, 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 1,264 hotline calls, 208 (16%) calls were referred by the public or neighbours, accounting for the second largest group of referrers, followed by 92 (7%) 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 6 to 8**

Of the 248 children involved in the 200 suspected child abuse cases, 49 (20%) were 6 to 8 years old, 43 (17%) were 3 to 5 years old, 39 (16%) were 9 to 11 years old and 38 (15%) were 12 to 14 years old. The figures indicated that the most vulnerable group was the age ranging from 6 to 8, followed by children from 3 to 5 years old, these range covered the pre-school and lower

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primary school period.

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.

Affected by the pandemic since 2020, schools have been closed for most of the time, children and their parents stay at home for a long time. Parents have to take into account the role of teachers, and children have more time to be exposed to online games, which have intensified parent-child conflicts. Besides, students in the K3 lack preparation for entering Primary One. 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% of the suspected abusers were family members**

There were 221 suspected abusers in the 200 suspected child abuse cases. Of the 221 suspected abusers, 176 (79%) were family members, including 66 (30%) mothers, 52 (24%) fathers, 38 (17%) parents, 13 (6%) grandmothers, 5 (2%) grandfathers, 1 stepfather and 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 to grow in a safe and happy family.

### **Nearly 50% were physical abuse**

Of the 200 suspected child abuse cases, 96 cases (48%) involved physical abuse, which ranked the highest rate. The second highest were sexual abuse, 33 cases (17%). There were 25 multiple

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abuse and 24 neglect cases (12%), followed by psychological abuse 22 (11%). Corporal punishment is closely related to physical abuse, 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 need attention**

Of the 200 suspected child abuse cases, 33 (17%) 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, the number of newly reported sexual abuse cases in 2020 increased by 8 (2.6%) cases compared with 2019, the number of newly reported sexual abuse cases from January to June 2021 increased by 99 (86.8%) cases compared with the same period in 2020. In addition, according to the statistical report of the SWD, the offenders aged 16 or below increased by 5 (14.3%) in 2020 compared with 2019. During the pandemic, children have more time to surf the Internet and use smartphone for learning and communication, this has increased the risk of children coming into contact with potential offenders online, and the situation requires 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. Sex education is very important to children's physical and mental development, but Hong Kong still lacks comprehensive and systematic school sex education. It is also important to develop strategies to combat various online sexual crimes.

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

Of the 200 suspected child abuse cases, 25 (12%) involved multiple abuse cases. Among them, 19 cases involved physical abuse and psychological abuse. Physical abuse begins with mild corporal punishment which often intensifies over time and 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.

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### **Over 10% were neglect cases**

Of the 200 suspected child abuse cases, 24 (12%) were neglect cases. Among them, 14 were children who were left unattended at home and 6 cases were related to inadequate physical care and. 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 200 suspected child abuse cases, 22 (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.

### **Risk factors of suspected child abuse / difficulty in child management cases**

As for the risk factors of suspected child abuse / difficulty in child management cases, 79.6% were related to suspected abusers/parents/caregivers. Among them, the highest proportions were lack of child rearing and parenting skills, emotional or psychological problems, and marital problems. Child-related factors accounted for 22.5%, of which the highest proportions were behavioral problems, emotional or psychological problems, and academic performance. Environmental factors accounted for 32.9%, among which the highest proportions were lack of community resources, economic difficulties and lack of support network. 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.

### **Our recommendations to the Government:**

1. To accept the recommendations of the Report by The Law Reform Commission of Hong Kong on "Causing or allowing the death or serious harm of a child or vulnerable adult" introducing the new offence and reviewing the maximum penalty under section 27 of the Offences against the Person Ordinance (Cap. 212).
2. To support the Government's action to establish a mandatory reporting mechanism for suspected child abuse cases, and it is hoped that a complete supporting package will be established, such as allocating resources to increase manpower allocation, setting up a

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triage system to handle cases of different risk levels, professional training plans, and community publicity and education, 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 set up a mandatory Sex Conviction Record Check System and a mandatory treatment programme for criminals committing serious sexual crimes, revise the Guidelines on Sex Education in Schools and carry out comprehensive school 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.
5. 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.
6. To carry out systematic parent education programmes for delivering positive parenting methods.
7. To provide resources for early prevention services, such as home visitation services for families with infant and toddlers to support new parents to learn positive parenting and home safety knowledge.
8. 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.
9. 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.
10. 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.

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11. The Commission on Children needs to fulfill the spirit of the “United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child” and practice its functions, to ensure that children's voices are heard in the process of formulating child-related policies, and to review laws and policies to conduct child impact assessment, so that Hong Kong children as well as their rights to development and participation are protected.
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.
14. To promote child protection policy in the community to create a safe and friendly environment for children.

### **Social worker's case sharing**

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

Yi is a single mother with a daughter and a son. One child is quiet while the other one is active, and they are living happily together now. The eldest daughter likes art and is interested in drawing. The youngest son is 10-year-old and he is active and smart. Yi feels happy with her children and always smiles when talking about them. Her burden is still heavy, but she can overcome and walk through it bravely.

Recalling that when Yi was pregnant, she broke up with her boyfriend, and the children followed her. Her son was found to have a heart problem and needed surgery immediately after he was born more than 20 days. Since then, Yi had often accompanied her son in and out of the hospital for different surgeries and examinations. Later, he was diagnosed with ADHD and Autism. Meanwhile, Yi had to take care of her daughter and she was really exhausted. Fortunately, she

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was referred to the Daylily Project for Young/Single Mothers by our social worker and she met the two volunteers, Jennifer and Amy. During the services, the volunteers not only cared about the children's growth, but also supported Yi's emotions. Since the youngest son was weak, Yi escorted him to hospital frequently. The volunteers became the strongest backing for Yi. They could share her worries and provide assistance when necessary. In addition to accompany her to take her son to hospital, they assisted her in taking care of her daughter. Under COVID-19, the volunteers continued to visit and care for Yi and her children. During the summer vacation, the volunteers even took leave to take the family to play around, which made Yi feel gratifying, as she felt guilty for not taking the children out. Now, Yi no longer feels lonely in life and child care. She becomes positive and optimistic to face the difficulties in life, and is confident that she can take good care of her children.

Yi thanks the project social worker and volunteers for their support, care, encouragement and companionship, so that she could take care of her children with confidence.

The two volunteers are also grateful that they have met Yi through the project and witnessed Yi's changes. They think that Yi demonstrates a good model as a mother and a father. She is brave and optimistic. She never gives up when facing difficulties. Now, they are happy to see that Yi's family is full of joy and happiness. Because of Yi's efforts and dedication, her youngest son is now cheerful and lively, and he has achieved good results in examinations and won scholarship.

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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