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Press Release
Protect Children for Optimal Development
17th November 2022

Today, Against Child Abuse (ACA) held the 43rd press conference to report on significant services and statistics of its work for the year 2021/22 and to share concerns and recommendations for child protection. ACA provides child abuse 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 1,136 cases were handled by our hotline and drop-in services in the year 2021/22, 168 (15%) were suspected child abuse cases.

Over 70% of the callers were family members

Of the 1,136 hotline calls, 807 (71%) were reported by family members. Of the 807 family members, 681 (84%) were mothers, 72 (9%) were fathers, 46 (6%) were relatives or friends, 8 (1%) were the suspected abused children themselves. There were 5 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, mainly related to their children's learning and behavioral problems. With the disclosure of serious child abuse cases or death cases in recent years, it has aroused social concern. Of the 1,136 hotline calls, 234 (21%) calls were referred by the public or neighbours, accounting for the second largest group of referrers, followed by 87 (8%) professionals and 2 by the media. Family members, public, neighbours 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 202 children involved in the 168 suspected child abuse cases, 54 (27%) were 6 to 8 years old, 43 (21%) were 3 to 5 years old, and 36 (18%) were 9 to 11 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 primary school period.

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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 need 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.

The mental health of parents and children has been greatly affected by the continued raging of COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact of the fifth wave of pandemic was even more severe. The unprecedented measures of early summer vacation in schools also increased the pressure on working parents to take care of their children. Children were unable to participate in extra-curricular activities during such summer vacation, and they had more and longer time to be exposed to online games, which intensified parent-child conflicts. For those children with special education needs and their parents, social distancing measures and limited support available to children increased the pressure on parents/caregivers. When facing various challenges, parents need to care for their children and help them handle their emotions and stress, and adapt to changes in the 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.

65% of the suspected abusers were family members

There were 194 suspected abusers in the 168 suspected child abuse cases. Of the 194 suspected abusers, 129 (65%) were family members, including 55 (28%) mothers, 28 (14%) fathers, 32 (17%) parents, 7 (4%) grandfathers, 3 (2%) grandmothers, 2 step-parents and 2 siblings.

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 sense 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.

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Nearly 60% were physical abuse

Of the 168 suspected child abuse cases, 96 cases (57%) involved physical abuse, which ranked the highest rate. The second highest were psychological abuse, 23 cases (14%), There were 20 sexual abuse cases (12%) and 17 neglect cases (10%), followed by 12 multiple abuse cases (7%). Corporal punishment is closely related to physical abuse and is often mistakenly perceived as a way of discipline to control and improve children's misbehavior. In fact, corporal punishment is not only unhelpful to discipline, but also alienates parent-child relationship and children 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 child rights and is a form of violence that should be totally banned.

Psychological abuse cases should not be ignored

Of the 168 suspected child abuse cases, 23 cases (14%) 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 leading 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 ignored 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 harm to children.

Sexual abuse cases need attention

Of the 168 suspected child abuse cases, 20 cases (12%) were child sexual abuse. In recent years, the cases of suspected offenders/offenders who have used smartphone 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 2021 increased by 135 (43%) cases compared with 2020. In addition, according to the statistical report of the SWD, the offenders aged 16 or below increased by 19 (47.5%) in 2021 compared with 2020. 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 impacts 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 legislation and strategies to combat various online sexual crimes.

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Over 10% were neglect cases

Of the 168 suspected child abuse cases, 17 (10%) were neglect cases. Among them, 12 were children who were left unattended at home and 4 cases were related to inadequate medical care. 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.

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

Of the 168 suspected child abuse cases, 12 (7%) involved multiple abuse cases. Among them, 10 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.

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, 75.6% 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 33.7%, of which the highest proportions were behavioral problems, academic performance, and emotional or psychological problems. Environmental factors accounted for 15.4%, among which the highest proportions were lack of community resources, lack of support network, and family crisis. 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 final 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 complete the legislative work on mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse cases as soon as possible, and formulate clear and precise requirements and guide on reporting criteria, reporting channels and time limit, measures to protect reporters, implementation details, etc., and provide appropriate, regular and continuous trainings for professionals to

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enhance their capacity for early identification and handling of suspected child abuse cases. In doing so, the reporting mechanism could be made effective.

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, develop the Guidelines on Sex Education in Schools and carry out comprehensive school sex education, and formulate regulations / policies 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 enact clear legislation on child psychological abuse and raise public awareness of child psychological abuse.
6. To carry out systematic parent education programmes for delivering positive parenting methods.
7. To provide more resources for early prevention services, such as home visitation services for families with infants 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 health problems or substance abuse, etc.
9. To face up to the problem of leaving children unattended, improve the quality, monitoring and provision of residential child care and related services, enhance after-school care services, 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. To ensure that children's voices are heard in the process of formulating child-related policies, and that the impact of policies on children is reviewed and assessed so that their rights to protection, development and participation are safeguarded.
12. To develop a central data bank for children to centralize, collect, analyze and disseminate related information on child protection and child development, to facilitate research, resource allocation, and directions of policy and service.
13. To promote child protection policy in the community to create a safe and friendly environment for children.

Social worker's case sharing

In the past 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 70% of the single/young mothers were living in public housing or with their family members, others were living in subdivided units. Around 60% 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 was shared below.

Shan has two daughters, who aged seven and three. Both of the girls are active. When Shan's elder daughter started primary school, she was diagnosed with dyslexia, which made Shan feel stressed. Taking care of their daily lives and schoolwork are challenging and make Shan tired. Fortunately, Shan was referred to the Daylily Project for Young/Single Mothers by United Christian Hospital, where she met Mary and Liz, two volunteers. During the services, the volunteers often accompany the family to join the project's activities to give children more opportunities to interact with others. It also gives Shan a chance to vent her emotions.

Shan is grateful for the care of the social worker and the volunteers, allowing her and her daughters to see new things and helping them meet more people.

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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Against Child Abuse
防止虐待兒童會

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