

Patron : Prof. Ian Grenville Cross
GBS, SC

贊助人 : 江樂士教授
GBS, 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
BBS
主席 : 張志雄醫生
BBS

Director : Ms. Donna Wong
總幹事 : 黃翠玲女士

Press Release

Protect Children for Optimal Development

16th November 2023

Today, Against Child Abuse (ACA) held the 44th press conference to report on significant services and statistics of its work for the year 2022/23 and 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 1,232 cases were handled by our hotline and drop-in services in the year 2022/23, 187 (15%) were suspected child abuse cases.

75% of the callers were family members

Of the 1,232 hotline calls, 915 (75%) were reported by family members. Of the 915 family members, 786 (86%) were mothers, 71 (8%) were fathers, 50 (5%) were relatives or friends, 8 (1%) were the suspected abused children themselves. There were 3 suspected abusers who reported the cases themselves and sought assistance.

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 1,232 hotline calls, 234 (19%) calls were referred by the public or neighbours, accounting for the second largest group of referrers, followed by 80 (6%) professionals. 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 222 children involved in the 187 suspected child abuse cases, 56 (25%) were 6 to 8 years old, 44 (20%) were 9 to 11 years old, and 42 (19%) were 3 to 5 years old. The figures indicated that the most vulnerable group was the age ranging from 6 to 8, followed by children from 9 to 11 years old, these ranges covered the primary school period.

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Against Child Abuse

防止虐待兒童會

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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.

As the COVID-19 pandemic eases and society gradually returns to normal, parents and children still face difficulties in adapting. In terms of returning to school life, children need to adapt to the new learning environment and rules, and they also need to comply with social distancing, wearing masks and other epidemic prevention measures, which will have an impact on their social interaction and expression skills, especially for students with special learning needs. Meanwhile, after a long period of remote online learning, children need to readjust to the face-to-face teaching model, and it will take time to return to normal learning rhythm and concentration. Some parents even face with the difficulty of regulating their children's addiction to the Internet. In addition, the pandemic has also had a negative impact on children's mental health. Prolonged social isolation and restrictions may make them feel lonely, anxious and depressed. They need to learn to rebuild social relationships and restore trust in the outside world.

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.

Nearly 70% of the suspected abusers were family members

There were 206 suspected abusers in the 187 suspected child abuse cases. Of the 206 suspected abusers, 142 (69%) were family members, including 66 (32%) mothers, 42 (21%) fathers, 21 (10%) parents, 7 (4%) grandmothers, 2 (1%) grandfathers, 1 step-mother and 3 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

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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 55% were physical abuse

Of the 187 suspected child abuse cases, 105 cases (56%) involved physical abuse, which ranked the highest rate. The second highest was psychological abuse, 31 cases (16%). There were 20 multiple abuse cases (11%), 16 sexual abuse cases (9%) and 15 neglect cases (8%). 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 makes 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 187 suspected child abuse cases, 31 cases (16%) 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 187 suspected child abuse cases, 16 cases (9%) 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 offenders aged 16 or younger were also on the rise. 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

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still lacks comprehensive and systematic school sex education. It is also important to develop legislation and strategies to combat various online sexual crimes.

Nearly 10% were neglect cases

Of the 187 suspected child abuse cases, 15 (8%) were neglect cases. Among them, 7 were children who were left unattended at home, and insufficient physical and medical care accounted for 4 cases each. 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 187 suspected child abuse cases, 20 (11%) involved multiple abuse cases. Among them, 15 cases involved physical 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 loud 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, 57.8% were related to suspected abusers/parents/caregivers. Among them, the highest proportions were lack of child rearing and parenting skills, expectations too high for children, emotional or psychological problems, and marital problems. Child-related factors accounted for 16.3%, of which the highest proportions were behavioral problems, academic performance, and emotional or psychological problems. Environmental factors accounted for 22.3%, among which the highest proportions were lack of community resources, lack of support network, and economic difficulty. 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. Regarding the "Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse Bill", we learn that the Government has initiated the process of formulating the "Mandatory Reporter Guide" and has begun to increase the number of places in residential care services for children, as well as strengthen manpower allocation and professional support. We hope that the Bill will be successfully passed in the Legislative Council as soon as possible. Supplemented by

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complete supporting measures, a comprehensive protection net for children can be weaved as early as possible.

2. 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).
3. Corporal punishment is not an effective method of discipline and can easily escalate to the level of violence unwittingly. It should be totally banned, including in the home.
4. To set up a mandatory Sex Conviction Record Check System and a mandatory treatment programme for criminals committing serious sexual crimes, 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 establish a review mechanism for serious child abuse cases so that cases can be quickly reviewed, responded to and prevention strategies formulated.
7. To strengthen systematic parent education programmes for delivering positive parenting methods, and 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, continue to evaluate the quality, monitoring and provision of residential child care and related services, as well as the

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service needs of after-school care, 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.
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 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 of other districts. Nearly 70% of the single/young mothers lived in public housing or with their family members, and others lived in subdivided units. Around 60% of them received CSSA, while the rest had family's support or work. Among the project families, half 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.

Sally (anonym) was referred by the United Christian Hospital to join the Daylily Project when her daughter was almost 1 year old. At that time, she had to go to work and study, and had to take care of her daughter alone. She was also diagnosed with postpartum depression and her maternal family did not provide any support, making her feel very confused. Later the project volunteers regularly visited her and listened to her feelings, and encouraged her to participate in different activities. Sally began to get to know other families, and her daughter also felt happy in the activities. The Daylily Project has been supporting young or single mothers like Sally through volunteer visitation and different parent-child activities.

The implementation of the project relies on the support and participation of volunteers. Ellen has been supporting many families since joining the project as volunteer in 2011. In the process, she feels that she is playing the role of a friend, providing a channel for the project families to

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receive support and comfort when they encounter problems. In addition, they can obtain more positive parenting information and enhance the self-confidence of single mothers to face future challenges through the intervention of social worker. Ellen hopes that the mothers in the project can take the initiative to learn more skills in child care and actively participate in lectures, workshops, and other activities at the centre. With the support of peer and volunteers, they will have a platform to express their stress. Even on the road to single parenthood, they will not feel alone and helpless.

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

Tel: 3542 5722 / 9121 4650

Ms Summer LIN

Funding and Communications Manager

Tel: 3542 5725 / 9470 4801

Email: pr@aca.org.hk