



CARING FOR OUR
children



Presbyterian Church
of Aotearoa New Zealand



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Material in Chapter 3 used with the permission of Families Commissioner Lyn Campbell and A Theology of Children with permission from Nove Vailaau.

PRAYER

Dear Lord our God, as we gather to reflect on our changing world may we remember with gratitude and humility that it is your world and your cherished people of whom we speak.

Help us to see children and families as you see them; enlarge us with new understanding; enable us to act with compassion and justice for the sake of Jesus and your love. Amen

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Caring for our Children

Introduction

Why create a resource on caring for our children? Children are an ordinary part of life, aren't they? Just there? Even if we don't have children ourselves, we all know how little ones should be cared for, don't we?

New Zealand used to be known as a great place to bring up kids. Sadly, our reputation has slipped in the last few years. According to UNICEF reports, New Zealand is now near the bottom of the class of developed nations when it comes to our children's wellbeing. Add to that some horrific recent cases of child abuse and it would be easy to despair. Many are asking: *What's gone wrong? How do we put it right?* Government agencies and local communities alike are searching for answers.

This booklet is not a political manifesto or a parenting manual. It's designed to raise awareness of the status of children in our society and stimulate an effective response, based on these foundations:

- » Children are people too
- » Children are our future
- » Children's voices are not easily heard so they need others to speak and advocate on their behalf
- » As the family of God, the Church has a responsibility to protect and serve the vulnerable, including children. As Jesus said, *"Just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me."* (Matthew 25:40).

Whenever a child is killed or seriously hurt, there is someone who says, "I was worried about that child, but didn't know what to do". We hope that by following these studies, you will:

SEE what is happening to our children

UNDERSTAND the issues surrounding their care and be inspired to

ACT and **SPEAK OUT** for their wellbeing.

The studies in this resource can be mixed and matched for use in a variety of settings:

- » Small group discussions
- » Several workshops, perhaps following a church service
- » A longer seminar or workshop.

Children, Parents and Families – a Biblical reflection

by **Graham Redding**

More than 3000 years ago, Moses gave an instruction that became one of the defining characteristics of Judaism. Speaking to the Israelites, he said, "Teach these things to your children, speaking of them when you are at home or on the way, when you lie down and when you rise up" (Deuteronomy 6:7).

This describes an abiding concern for future generations – to educate and nurture young people in the faith. Children and young people matter to God; they are an intrinsic part of the community. Judaism reflected its understanding of the importance of children in the ethos of the synagogue and rituals of worship within the home.

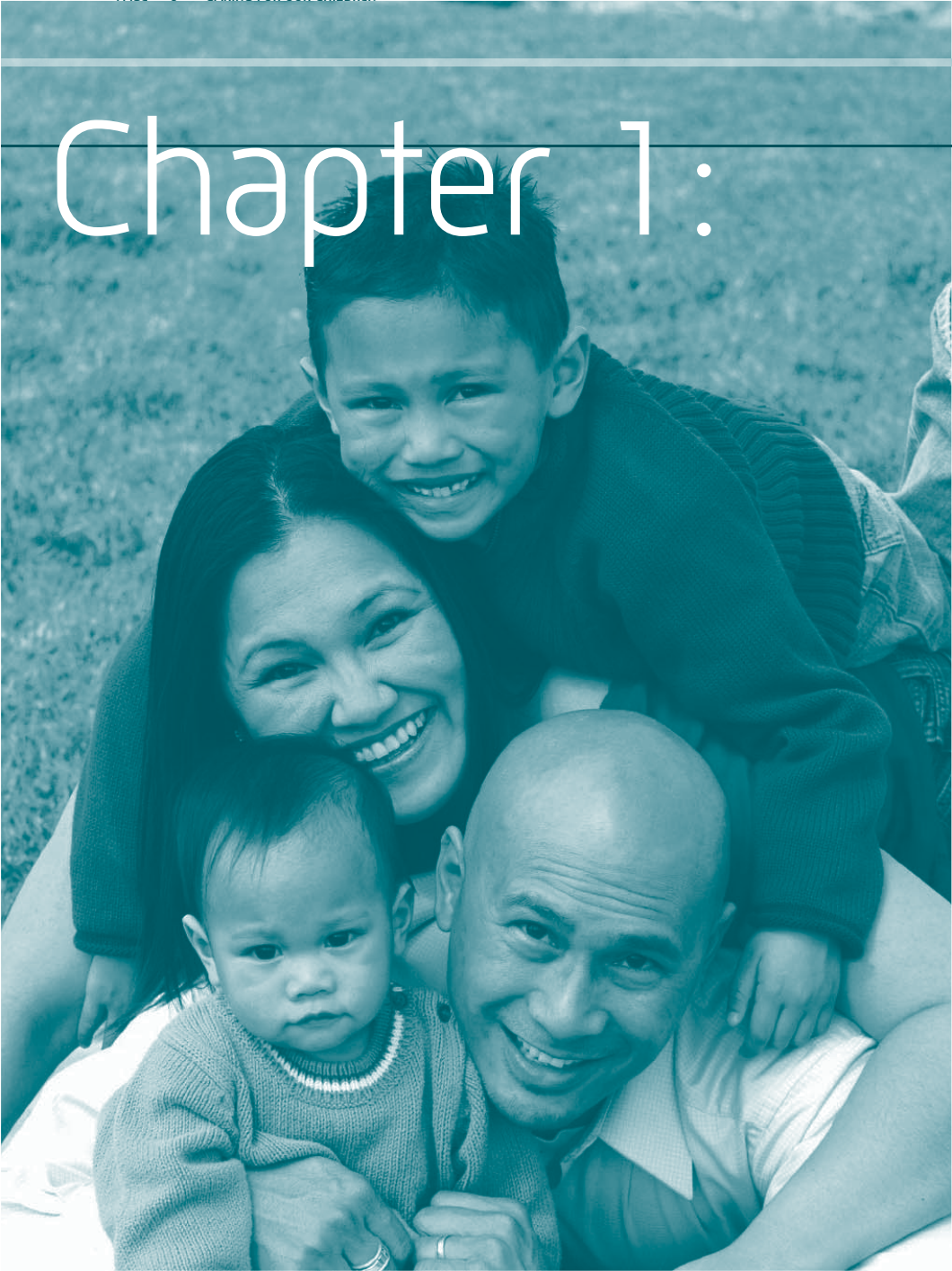
Christianity shares this commitment. Jesus gathered children around him and blessed them, and referred to them in his teaching about the Kingdom of God. A special place was given to the home in the early history of the Church in the book of Acts. Indeed, the first churches were home churches.

Judaism and Christianity are not alone in affirming the intrinsic value of children, the significance of family life and the importance of education, moral formation and good parenting. People of many different faiths and none affirm these things.

There are differences of opinion within Christianity itself, as recent public debates about the physical discipline of children have shown. Nonetheless, we can make some important affirmations:

1. As important as the family unit is in God's purposes and for building human community, it is not immune from the effects of sin and the need for redemption. Loyalty to Christ takes priority over other relationships for believers (Mark 1:16-20 and Galatians 3:27-29).
2. The Biblical commandment to honour one's parents (Exodus 20:12) does not confer absolute authority. In the New Testament parents are urged to foster a relationship of mutual respect with their children (Ephesians 6:1-4).
3. Christian parents, caregivers and church communities have a responsibility to seek the mind and way of Christ as they minister to children. We are encouraged to be "imitators of God as dearly loved children" (Ephesians 5:1) and thereby reveal the love of Christ in all that we say and do.

Chapter 1:



CHAPTER 1:

What's happening to our children?

For most children, New Zealand is a wonderful place in which to grow up. They are nurtured by two parents within a loving family. There are plenty of green spaces to play in, good schools, well-equipped hospitals and lots of things to do, experience and learn. For some, however, childhood is not such a safe and happy experience. Trauma, abuse, violence and neglect are a fact of life (and occasionally death) for thousands of children every year.

Some children have become household names – for all the wrong reasons. James Whakaruru, Lillybing, Delcelia Witika, Coral Ellen Burrows, Nia Glassie and the Kahui twins made headlines for their murder at the hands of relatives or caregivers. People react to such cases with shock and outrage. Many wonder what child abuse tells us about the real nature of our society, and what we can do to prevent other children from being hurt and killed.

Responses to child abuse range from “isolated cases” to “just the tip of the iceberg”. So what can we know for sure about child abuse in New Zealand? How prevalent is it and is it getting worse?

Statistics on child abuse are extremely difficult to interpret accurately. Families or individuals may come to the notice of several different agencies, all with different ways of collecting information and analysing it. Policies, definitions and recording practices within agencies may change over time as well, making it difficult to compare figures from one year to the next. When it comes to comparing New Zealand with other countries, the figures have to be treated with even greater caution.

According to one study done in 2005, “There are no routinely collected population-based statistics that document the incidence or prevalence of child abuse and neglect in NZ.”¹ However, by looking at data from agencies like the Police, Child Youth and Family, Women’s Refuges and the Ministry of Health we can gain some idea, always bearing in mind that the numbers may overlap.

CYF notifications

Child Youth and Family is the main government body charged with the care and protection of children and young people. It receives notifications from the police, education and health sectors, families and the general public about cases where abuse is suspected. In the year to June 2007 it received 75,326 notifications, 62 percent of which required

¹ “Beyond Zero Tolerance”, *Families Commission*, August 2005.

further action. As a result, around 5000 children and young people were placed in care while close to 18,000 received social work intervention.²

Notifications have doubled since 2001. Reasons for this may include greater public awareness of domestic violence and child abuse, changes to the system itself and a greater number of referrals from police. An increasing number of investigations result in no abuse being found at all. Even so, "it would appear only 20 percent of avoidable child deaths are known to CYF and many child abuse victims remain undetected."³

Police

Nearly 40 percent of all violent crimes are now classed as domestic violence offences. In 2005/06 police attended 56,380 family violence incidents and offences, with children present at more than half of these. This means that more than 65,000 children witnessed a close family member being hurt, verbally abused or threatened. Witnessing abuse is the most common form of abuse children experience, and is classed as an act of violence in itself according to the Domestic Violence Act [1995].⁴

Women's Refuge

In 2006 16,738 women and 12,107 children sought the services of Women's Refuges, numbers that have increased by more than 10,000 (65 percent) in the last five years. A total of 2643 women and 263 children had been physically attacked.⁵

Hospital care and deaths

Around eight children die from maltreatment every year and one family member is killed through violence every 12.5 days. Most of the children killed are under one year old, with Maori males most at risk of intentional injury leading to death.

In any one year, numbers have been as high as 12 (in 2001) but rates have shown an overall steady decline in the last decade and a half, especially for Maori. More girls than boys are victims and all recent deaths resulted from family violence, with men representing two-thirds of the perpetrators.⁶

In the five years to 2004 there were 426 hospital admissions for intentional injury involving children under five. Again, children under one year old are four times more likely to be hospitalised than children aged one to four years old.⁷

² Ministry of Social Development, Annual Report, 2006/07.

³ Craig, E et al (eds) *Monitoring the Health of New Zealand Children and Young People: Indicator Handbook*, Auckland: 2007.

⁴ Family Violence Clearinghouse fact sheet 2007

⁵ Women's Refuge website www.womensrefuge.org.nz

⁶ Figures drawn from FVC overview, verified by Mike Doolan, "Research Focus: Child Homicide in New Zealand: 2001-2005", *Te Awatea Review* 4, no. 1, July 2006.

⁷ "Children at increased risk of death from maltreatment and strategies for prevention", *Child, Youth & Family (MSD)*, July 2006.

SNAPSHOT SUMMARY

- » About eight children die each year from maltreatment
- » NZ has the third highest rate of child death from maltreatment in the OECD
- » Maori children are twice as likely to be abused as children from other groups
- » One family member is killed through family violence every 12 days
- » More than 65,000 children witnessed family violence in 2005
- » Around 5000 children are in CYF care at any one time
- » In the year to June 2003, 7361 children were assessed by CYF as abused or neglected

What is abuse?

Abuse typically involves fear, intimidation, and emotional deprivation. It is often expressed through a systematic, continuing pattern of behaviour on the part of the perpetrator.

Abuse may be

- » **physical** – non-accidental bodily harm
- » **sexual** – when an adult, older or more powerful person uses a child for a sexual purpose
- » **emotional** – continual assault on a child's emotional, psychological or social well-being

It may occur through **neglect** – failure to provide for a child's basic needs. Or through **witnessing family violence**. The different types of abuse are usually interrelated and they all have long-lasting effects.

“Children are like wet cement. Whatever falls on them makes an impression.” – Dr Haim Ginott

Countering the myths

Child abuse doesn't happen in my neighbourhood.

FACT: Abuse happens in every neighbourhood – it may simply be more hidden in some than others. Violence happens in all types of families; one parent, two parent, guardian or caregiver; whether urban or rural, rich, poor or middle-class. Some risk factors do increase the likelihood of a child being injured or killed, including poverty, single-parenthood, poor housing, weak family ties, and parental drug or alcohol abuse.

Only Maori and Polynesians bash their kids.

FACT: Children from all cultures, classes, backgrounds and socio-economic circumstances are abused.

Statistics show that Māori children are twice as likely as non-Māori children to be killed, neglected or abused, often because of the greater proportionate influence of the risk factors mentioned above. But of family violence incidents attended by police in 2006, equal percentages of victims were Māori and Caucasian (about 40 percent) while ten percent were Pacific Island and only two percent Asian and Indian respectively.⁸

Women are just as violent as men towards their children.

FACT: In all family violence statistics in New Zealand, men predominate as the perpetrators of the most severe and lethal abuse while women and children predominate as their victims. Some mothers are violent towards their children; this may be because women in general remain overwhelmingly responsible for childcare and can lack support.

Child abuse is increasing in New Zealand.

FACT: Most indicators, such as referrals to welfare agencies and police, show a dramatic rise over the last few years, while the rate of child deaths from abuse may be declining. One reason for the increases in referrals may be recent changes in the way police and welfare agencies report, record and respond to incidents. Another is increased public awareness. On the other hand, a lot of abuse still goes unreported. For instance, police estimate they see only 18 percent of violence within homes. One commentator wrote: “Family violence isn’t increasing. What is happening is that the hidden part of the iceberg is coming to the surface.”⁹

⁸ Health Indicator Handbook p 265

⁹ Chris Barton, “Hidden Violence comes to Light”, NZ Herald, 21 July 2007.

The odd bash doesn't hurt kids in the long term.

FACT: Most abuse is never isolated but occurs over a long period of time as a pattern of controlling behaviour by the abuser. Children who experience violence are more likely to develop severe cognitive and behavioural problems, become violent as adolescents and continue the cycle of violence.

What happens in my home is my business.

FACT: Child abuse has far-reaching consequences for society, as well as causing ongoing pain and suffering for individuals. Children may suffer long-term health problems, and there are often ongoing welfare and legal costs associated with their care. A 1994 study estimated the economic costs of family violence at between \$1.2 billion and \$5.8 billion annually.¹⁰

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

>> New Zealand has an international obligation to recognise the human rights of children and offer them special protection. In 1993 the Government signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹¹

Questions

1. Do the statistics on abuse and children's wellbeing in New Zealand surprise you?
2. How does this information make you feel?
3. Who or what do you think is responsible for the current state of affairs?
4. Why is the proper care of children important?
5. What are the effects on society and our communities of not caring adequately for our children?

Reflection

Spend a few moments reflecting on Jesus' words in Matthew 25:40 *"Just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me."*

- >> Do you think the "least of these" could apply to children?
- >> What does this story indicate about our responsibilities towards those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged in our society?

¹⁰ 'Beyond Zero Tolerance'

¹¹ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. See www.unhcr.ch/html/menu2/6/crc/treaties/crc.htm and the Office of the Children's Commissioner www.occ.org.nz/childcomm/children_and_young_people_s_rights

Chapter 2:



CHAPTER 2:

Why does abuse happen?

Any suffering always raises the big question, why? The question is particularly painful when it comes to child abuse. How can we explain such incomprehensible cruelty? What leads a person to harm defenceless and vulnerable children, the very ones who are so dependent on them for nurture and care?

God's attitude towards those who hurt the powerless is plain:

*There are six things that the Lord hates,
seven that are an abomination to him:
haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
and hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked plans,
feet that hurry to run to evil,
a lying witness who testifies falsely,
and one who sows discord in a family.* (Proverbs 6:16-19)

But the Bible also tells us that "The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made." (Psalm 145:9) That includes the perpetrators of child abuse. What can we learn that will help us understand what is going on in our communities, and with understanding, show compassion for all those who are involved, whether victims or offenders?

There is a great deal of research into the roots of family violence in general and child abuse in particular. This has been given particular impetus by the "It's not OK" campaign launched by the Government in conjunction with other community agencies in 2007, but analysis of risks and trends has been going on for decades.

Two themes emerge:

- >> Abuse happens in all communities, from the wealthy and well educated to the poor and disadvantaged. However, some factors make it more likely that children will be mistreated.
- >> The presence of any one risk factor does not mean necessarily that a child is being abused. More usually, a combination of risk factors, accumulating over time, lies behind the evidence of abuse. The pathways to abuse are complex and varied, but even so, many people thought to be "at risk" will never harm children.¹²

¹² "Children at increased risk of death from maltreatment and strategies for prevention", Child, Youth & Family (MSD), July 2006.

“The challenge of ending child abuse is the challenge of breaking the link between adults’ problems and children’s pain.”

The risk factors can be viewed in several clusters:

Individual: lack of parenting skills by parents or caregivers; inability to cope with stress and conflict in healthy ways; parental addictions e.g. drugs, alcohol, gambling; poor mental health; a history of offending, especially from an early age; low levels of education and employment.

Family: young parental age; isolation; loss of extended networks; intergenerational patterns of anger and violence; a background of adversity.

Community: cultural upheaval or displacement; loss of extended family and whanau; changing patterns of work; increased mobility; inadequate childcare facilities.

Society: poverty; struggle to access basics (medical care, education, food, housing, transport); social welfare dependency; low income; increased acceptance of single parenting.

Media & technology: TV violence; pornography; cyber-bullying.

Another cluster has to do with general attitudes and expectations. We all have a subconscious idea of what families and children should be like, but this may not match the reality. Our perceptions arise from our own upbringing and observation of others, but they’re also fed by the media and powerful cultural influences. We probably wouldn’t say or hear these attitudes expressed out loud but they might include:

Individualism: “Having children is my lifestyle choice.” “My children are an extension of me.”

Selfishness: “No one has the right to interfere in my family.”

Possessiveness: “My own children belong to me.”

Such attitudes create an environment in which human beings, and especially children, are devalued. In contrast, the Bible portrays individuals as unique and of inestimable worth.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

By educating ourselves about the signs of abuse, we can help protect children from further harm. These indicators may not be obvious and on their own and do not necessarily prove that a child is abused. They may be the result of other events, such as divorce, accidental injury or the birth of a new sibling. But they can be vital clues that a child is at risk and needs help.

Indicators may be **physical** such as unexplained injuries or **behavioural**, ranging from withdrawal to bed-wetting or aggression. Abusers may display signs as well, such as constantly calling a child dumb or stupid, isolating or controlling them inappropriately.

You may be aware of several **risk factors** in the child's environment or get the feeling that **something is not right** about their situation.

Those who work with or care for children have a responsibility to report suspected child abuse and many organisations have procedures for staff to follow. Remember that ultimately, it is the duty of Child Youth & Family or Police to assess and investigate whether abuse has actually occurred, but this should not absolve us from speaking up or taking action.

See Chapter 5 of this booklet and the CPS resource "How Can I Tell?" for further information.

Questions

1. Why are children especially vulnerable in our society and communities, do you think?
2. What are the major factors contributing to their vulnerability?
3. What do you think about each of these quotes about children? (see box) Do they indicate a faulty or a realistic view of children? Give your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with them. Can you think of others?
4. How would you sum up your perspective on children in one sentence?

Reflection

Psalm 128 depicts "The Happy Home of the Faithful", a picture of harmony, fruitfulness and prosperity.

- >> How do you feel about this picture of family life?
- >> How is it similar or different to your own experience?
- >> How does this psalm reflect the value God places on children and families?
- >> What constitutes "blessing" according to this psalm? What is the foundation for it?

Chapter 3:



CHAPTER 3:

What's changed?

What's changing?¹³

Fifty years ago, forms of family life were more homogenous. New Zealanders generally married in their 20s and had several children, often closely spaced, soon after marriage. Children left home in their late teens to find work and marry. Many families owned their own home and lived and worked in the same region for much of their lives. Typically, Dad was the breadwinner and Mum the primary care giver.

Today, fewer babies are being born. Fewer young people marry, or they marry later and for shorter periods as people separate and re-partner with greater frequency. Divorce, separation, de facto, civil unions and shorter marriages are all on the rise. A relatively high proportion (28 percent) of families are headed by sole parents. Both men and women work longer hours and many struggle to balance work, family life and community involvement. People live longer and as the population ages, the sandwich generation grows. More grandparents take on caring for their grandchildren.

It all adds up to a picture of greater fluidity and stress in family life as people juggle complex relationships and inter-connections. Even the shape and size of individual family units can ebb and flow as members travel between custodial and non-custodial parents, or major events bring sudden changes to home life (death, illness, redundancy, etc.) The multicultural mix of many households adds to the diversity.

What stays the same?

Although expectations of family life differ greatly across generations, cultures, and faiths, the primary function of family remains basically the same:

- » To nurture, raise, protect and socialise children
- » To maintain and develop the well-being of members through emotional, physical, spiritual and material support
- » To share affection, companionship, a sense of belonging and identity
- » To pass on values, attitudes, beliefs, culture, knowledge, obligations and property.

It must be remembered most families desire the best for their members, especially children, and most are resilient and doing well in spite of the odds.

¹³ Following sections taken from Family Commissioner Lyn Campbell, "Families and the Church" in New Vision NZ Vol 3, Vision Network NZ, 2008.

The impact on children

The vast majority of children are the biological offspring of the parents with whom they live, and continue to live in a two-parent family until mid or late adolescence at least. However, many children face the reality that:

- >> Their family will dissolve, reform or blend with another at some stage
- >> They will straddle two households as parents live apart and share custody
- >> They will become part of a wider family connected in blended, step or de facto relationships
- >> More upheavals in family living arrangements will take place over a shorter space of time
- >> Several different adults will be involved in their care or parenting
- >> Their parents will spend more time working away from home
- >> They themselves may have to contribute to the family income at a young age
- >> Dad may be missing from their lives, either physically or in significantly supportive ways
- >> They will have to parent their own parents as they grow older

Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." **(Matthew 11:29)**

Questions

1. How is childhood these days different from your own childhood?
2. What are the factors influencing your own attitudes towards children or the way you care for them?
3. What values should children be taught? How are they learning them? Whose responsibility is it to teach these values?

Reflection

Spend a few moments thinking about this proverb "*The good leave an inheritance to their children's children, but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous.*" (Proverbs 13:22)

- >> What kind of legacy have your parents and grandparents left in your life?
- >> What kind of inheritance do you want to leave for your children and grandchildren?
- >> What can you do now to make sure this happens?
- >> In what ways could you contribute meaningfully to the lives of others' children?

Chapter 4:



CHAPTER 4:

What helps prevent abuse?

So far we've looked at the negative side of the picture and some of the personal, family or social risk factors that contribute to child abuse.

On the other hand, there are a number of protective factors that serve to provide a buffer against negative factors accumulating across generations. They help people who might otherwise be at risk of abusing children to find resources, supports, or coping strategies that allow them to care for children effectively, even under stress.¹⁴

Note that, while much of the research about risk factors and preventive factors refers to families, there are many other people who influence outcomes for children – including sports coaches, teachers, youth leaders, kids' church leaders, or extended family. All those who care for children in some way, not just parents, can benefit from these insights.

What those who care for children need

Research has shown that the following protective factors are linked to a lower incidence of child abuse and neglect. They work together to reinforce each other:

1. A nurturing bond

When a child is loved by parents, extended family, whānau, guardian or caregiver, a bond of trust is created that affects all aspects of behaviour and development. Children thrive in an environment of acceptance, positive guidance, and protection.

2. Knowledge of parenting and child development

Caregivers who understand how children grow and develop can provide an environment where children can live up to their potential. Child abuse and neglect are often associated with a lack of skills and understanding of what to expect from a child at each stage of growth.

3. Adult resilience

Resilience is the ability to handle everyday stress and recover from occasional crises. Adults who are emotionally resilient have a positive attitude, creatively problem solve, effectively address challenges, and are less likely to direct anger and frustration at the children they care for. They're also more likely to seek help when they need it.

¹⁴ Child Welfare Information Gateway. *Promoting healthy families in your community: 2008 resource packet*. See www.childwelfare.gov/index.cfm

4. Social connections

Social isolation and perceived lack of support are linked to child maltreatment. Other supportive adults in the family and the community can be of vital help to parents and other caregivers when they need it.

5. Concrete supports

Parents, guardians and caregivers need basic resources such as food, clothing, housing, transportation, and access to healthcare to ensure the well being of their children. Social policy should endorse the provision of these material supports in the community.

In the previous chapter we also looked at how times have changed. With change comes the feeling that we've lost some vital tools for creating a healthy environment in which our children can develop and thrive as they should.

In one sense "there's nothing new under the sun" and children continue to be born into families and learn and grow as they've always done. But the shape of those families is now very different, and our children have to learn in a world that is more complex and sophisticated than it used to be.

What children need

To grow up healthy and happy, children need their basic physical needs met, including good food, adequate clothing, enough sleep, and supervision appropriate to their age. They need to feel loved and cared for by people who express affection and approval towards them. Mental and emotional stimulus through a wide range of experiences will help children grow and learn. They also need interaction with others to develop language, social and emotional skills.

Clear boundaries are important for fostering a supportive relationship between children and their parents or caregivers. Within these boundaries, children will be encouraged to explore and make decisions, building competence and independence.

A child who grows up nurtured in these ways is more likely to be a confident adult with strong family and social values, and respect for themselves and others.¹⁵

Questions

1. Discuss the recipe for healthy, happy children. Are all these ingredients essential? What others could you add?
2. What constitutes a healthy learning environment for children? Who is responsible for providing it?

¹⁵ *Children and Young People: Indicators of Wellbeing in New Zealand*, Ministry of Social Development, Wellington, 2004.

3. Do our actions match our words i.e. what are some areas in which we might tell children to do one thing but then model something different?
4. At times you may feel your own values as a parent or caregiver are contradicted by those in another environment e.g. school, media. How do you respond to this? What can you do about it?

Reflection

Read Ephesians 6:1-4 and Colossians 3:20-21.

- » Do you find this advice helpful? Explain why or why not.

Read Matthew 18:2-5

- » What do you think Jesus meant when he said we must “become like little children” in order to enter the kingdom of heaven?
- » What implications does “welcoming a little child like this” have for us as a church community?

The thorny issue of physical discipline

In 2007 the New Zealand Government changed the law regarding a legal defence for those charged with assaulting children. Section 59 of the Crimes Act (1961) stated that parents and guardians were justified in using “reasonable force” to correct children. The amendment sought to “make better provision for children to live in a safe and secure environment free from violence by abolishing the use of parental force for the purpose of correction”¹⁶ and it was passed by 113 votes to seven after some rewording.

The law now clarifies to some extent the circumstances and purposes for which reasonable force may be used, but none of the conditions specified justify the use of force for the purpose of correction. Police have discretion not to prosecute where the offence is considered to be inconsequential to the public interest.

The amendment caused a great deal of public controversy, with a range of reactions across the political and social spectrum. The “anti-smacking” debate, as it came to be known, continues to be raised whenever the issue of disciplining children is discussed.

On one hand are those who, using a broad definition of violence, consider smacking to be the thin end of the wedge of abuse. They believe there are more effective ways than physical punishment to discipline children, that punishment can be harmful emotionally as well as physically, and that children should have the same rights under the law as adults.

¹⁶ From the Police practice guide for the new Section 59. Release accessed at www.police.govt.nz/news/release/3149.html

Others say that a loving parent smacks a child for *their own good* whereas an abuser deliberately sets out to inflict harm and pain. They argue that a ban on smacking will do nothing to stop child abuse and seek the right to lovingly discipline their children as they choose, without interference from the State.

Christians are found on all sides of the debate (which has been hugely simplified here). Like other parents and caregivers, their opinions are influenced by their cultural context; how they themselves were brought up; what they've found works in the context of their own family life; and what they consider to be the proper relationship between parents and children. Their view is also shaped by their understanding of the Bible.

This is not to say that the Bible contains simple answers or that its interpretation is not also subject to dispute. For example, some see in Scripture the God of justice who must be obeyed, who punishes lapses from his holy law and has delegated his authority to others (like parents) to do likewise. Others discern a compassionate, gracious deity whose standard is "Love one another as I have loved you". How God's justice and mercy are to be combined and best expressed in our times – in our homes, churches and society at large – is a challenge for all those who take the name of Jesus Christ and call themselves Christians.

Chapter 5:



CHAPTER 5:

What can we do about child abuse?

It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the issue of child abuse but as followers of Jesus and members of the Christian community, we do have resources that enable us to address it together and welcome children into our midst in His name.

It may be helpful to think of three levels of involvement; the personal and relational level; the organisational level; and the level of attitudes and values. At every level, two are better than one; that is, it helps to work with others

Personal and relational. All of us form relationships with others who touch the lives of children in some way: our neighbours, work colleagues, friends, extended family, school or sport acquaintances. We need to be both alert and caring, watching out for the welfare of the children around us and "loving our neighbour as we love ourselves."

SOME SUGGESTIONS

- » Break the silence. Talk about child abuse, domestic violence, anger management and alcohol abuse.
- » Make friends with children. Listen to them and respect what they say. Never ignore a child who talks about violence or abuse.
- » Be a good neighbour. Get to know your community and help make it a safe one.
- » Know the indicators of abuse and who should be informed. Act to protect children.
- » Give caregivers a break. Offer to baby-sit, adopt a grandchild or a whole family. Let parents have time out, promote positive parenting resources.
- » Pray for children you know and their families.

"Nobody can do everything but everybody can do something."

Organisational. Your local church is a community that models the kingdom and family of God. The Church has relationships with agencies that represent and include children, it can advocate for children and form collaborative links with other organisations working on behalf of children.

SOME SUGGESTIONS

- » Get to know your local community of children and families and what their needs are.
- » Organise or support events that educate families, nurture children and create strong networks e.g. playgroups, immigrant support groups.
- » Create resources that support families in practical ways e.g. budgeting advice, babysitting club, parenting courses.
- » Be a good neighbour as a church. Connect with schools, kindergartens, Plunket and other organisations that serve children in your community.
- » Develop good working relationships with community agencies and programmes that deal with family violence prevention, crisis intervention or support. Get involved, offer help, and know how to make referrals.
- » Develop policies and protocols that protect children in your church events and programmes.
- » Form a prayer group to pray specifically for the children, families, schools, preschools and sports clubs in your area.
- » Create opportunities for children and families to come to know Jesus and experience his love through personal relationships or special events e.g. festive celebrations, children's or parents' parties.
- » Include children as full and valued members of the community of faith. Offer quality Christian education programmes and pastorally care for children.

Attitudes and values. This level has to do with underlying perspectives and assumptions that shape our behaviour, often subconsciously. In our society, these are expressed mainly through the media. For example, what does acceptance of TV violence tell us about how we value human beings, particularly children? As a Church, we have a responsibility to speak up for redemption in these areas, and also to practice what we preach.

SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK

- » Where does our congregation stand on the issue of child abuse?
- » Are we a community that welcomes and values children, allowing them to participate fully in the life of the Church?
- » Are our teachings being misinterpreted and used to justify violent behaviour in any way?

- » How do we model the use of power? How do we exercise discipline amongst ourselves as a congregation?
- » What does our Church community offer that would help to eliminate family violence?
- » Is our Church a safe place for children and families – physically, emotionally and spiritually?
- » Do we highly value those who work with children? How do we show this?

Whenever a child is killed or seriously hurt, there is someone who says, "I was worried about that child, but didn't know what to do".

What to do if you suspect abuse

It's important to take action when you suspect a child is being harmed. If you are on the staff of an organisation that cares for children, you should tell your manager or supervisor. If you are a neighbour or a friend, you might want to consult others who contribute to the child's well being e.g. teacher, sports coach.

WHAT TO REPORT

Report any suspicion that a child has been or is being abused – what you saw, heard, what the child told you, what someone else told you. You don't need to have proof. The authorities will investigate the situation.

WHEN TO REPORT

It's best to report your suspicions immediately as the child may need protection or medical care. Keep a note of any signs of abuse, dates, times, etc.

WHO TO REPORT TO

- » Police
- » The duty social worker at your nearest CYF office
- » Or call 0508 FAMILY (0508 326 459)
- » Both are 24-hour services so if you suspect a child is at risk, phone whatever the hour.
- » See www.cyf.govt.nz

WILL MY REPORT BE KEPT ANONYMOUS?

A report can be anonymous but there are usually good reasons for identifying yourself. CYF will want to make sure the information is credible and may need to speak with you again.

WHAT IF I MAKE A MISTAKE?

Many people decide not to act because they're afraid of being wrong, disloyal, interfering or breaking a confidence. Even if the case is not taken further, the law protects you if you supply information in good faith. Remember that children have a right to be safe and your intervention may protect them from further harm.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER I MAKE A REPORT?

If the authorities believe there are sufficient grounds for it, they will investigate and assess the situation further. They may intervene once, or plan a longer-term involvement. Court action could follow if a crime has been committed. You can expect to be told about the results of your notification.

Don't assume that someone else has acted. Your action could save a child's life.

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Reflection

Read Matthew 14:13-21 and John 6: 5-13 "Feeding the 5000".

- >> Imagine the scene and talk about the role of children in this event.
- >> What do children have to offer your church community?
- >> In what ways could you acknowledge and celebrate the contribution children make to the life of your community?
- >> What are our responsibilities as a body of Christ's followers to the children outside our own community as well as those in our midst?
- >> What do you think about the suggestions for action? (see box p25). Which one could you take up and begin to act on? What further resources do you need to make it happen?

¹⁷ Taken from *How Can I Tell?* Recognising when a child or family needs help. CPS booklet.

How to make your church 'Kids Friendly'

by Jill Kayser

Jesus' instruction to his disciples to "Let the children come to me" is not a passive suggestion but a firm directive. As his followers today, we need to take Jesus' command to heart and ensure that our churches are "kids friendly".

Kids Friendly churches are places of intent and action. They actively welcome, celebrate and nurture the children in their midst as well as looking outward to meet the needs of the community around them. They have a vision, a plan and a budget for ministering to children in their churches and communities.

Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." And he laid his hands on them and went on his way. [Mathew 19: 13-15]

In Kids Friendly churches, children belong and participate in the life and worship of the faith community and they are valued for the immense love and life they bring to the whole church family. Kids Friendly churches recognise that children create opportunities for people of all ages to learn from, respect and appreciate one another.

Kids Friendly churches are also intent on connecting with the children and families in their communities and sharing the love of Christ through outreach initiatives. Kids Friendly is a whole-church approach to children's ministry. Every member of the congregation is encouraged to love and advocate for children individually and collectively.

The alarming statistics relating to child abuse demand an urgent response from us as God's people. The factors linked to child abuse present a huge challenge but also highlight opportunities to respond as a church community. Poor parenting skills invite us to partner with other organisations to offer parent education. Stress and isolation invite us to offer counselling, supportive networks or simply loving friendship. Poverty invites us to respond with food and budgeting advice. Lack of sound values in our youth urges us to connect with our community's children and share the teachings and love of Christ.

Kids Friendly churches also seek to work with others, rather than constantly reinventing the wheel of children's ministry. With an issue as serious as child abuse it makes sense to take what works and offer skills, resources and experience to other agencies working with children, whether at risk or not.

So what does a Kids Friendly church actually look like in practical terms? The second part of Jesus' statement, "and do not stop them" gives us a clue as to what it is *not*.

The harsh reality is that too often, we do hinder children from coming to Jesus by not responding to them in positive ways. We don't know their names and exclude them from worship, babysitting them instead while adults do the serious stuff. We become irritated when they don't behave as we expect, or ignore those who don't meet our stereotypical idea of family. We are anxious to get them to church rather than seeking to meet their physical and emotional as well as spiritual needs. We abdicate our responsibility to minister to children to a few members of the church or persist with tired and disillusioned people running children's programmes.

A church that is truly Kids Friendly will understand its market. In other words, it will learn what it feels like to be a child of the 21st Century by asking children themselves. It will see children as the change agents they are and create a culture where children's ideas are heard, responded to and rewarded.

If our Church is to be Christ's agent of transformation for the children and families of our communities, we need to know who they are, seek ways to connect with them and accept responsibility for bringing Christ's love into their lives.

TWO EXAMPLES

- » One church surveyed its local community and discovered a disproportionate number of single parents. In considering how Jesus would respond to this, they decided to host a candlelit dinner for single parents while entertaining and feeding the children in the hall. Parents were overwhelmed by the unconditional love they experienced and some felt able to come to church on Sunday.
- » Another church's visit to local schools unearthed concerns over the increasing number of latchkey kids. The school principals and church worked together to develop an after-school and holiday care programme. The church now cares for up to 50 children each day while modelling Christian values and love.

A Theology of Children¹⁸

The incarnation is the greatest evidence of God's love for children. As Christians we believe that God came among us as a human being, born as a baby and raised as a child in an ordinary family. The Bible is also full of other stories about children and young people responding to God's call and contributing to his work and mission in the world. Jesus' welcoming attitude to children can be found throughout Matthew, Mark and Luke: "And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a child, and set him by him" (Luke 9:47). "Taking a child he placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it." (Mark 9:36). "But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you" (Jeremiah 1:7). See also Matt 10:42; 18:1-4, 10, 14; 19:13-14; Mark 42; 10:13-15; Luke 9:46-48; 17:1-2; 18:16-17; Hosea 11:1; Samuel 2:18-20; Psalm 8:2.

God values children

Like all human beings, children are created in God's image, so they are precious to God. God is honoured when those created in God's image are honoured, respected and loved. The Bible also talks about children as a gift from God, freely given as a sign of God's blessing. God demonstrates parenthood, frequently calling people God's "children" and lavishing grace and love on them. Jesus states that childlikeness is a prerequisite for understanding God's ways; anyone who welcomes little children in his name, welcomes him, and anyone who welcomes Jesus, accepts God himself (Mark 9:33-37).

The nature of children

Just like adults, children are human beings capable of good and bad. They can also exercise faith, worship, be redeemed through faith in Jesus Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit, just like adults. They are in the process of growing up, so they have the natural limitations of immaturity and are dependent on those who are older to nurture them and help them develop. They need guidance to learn moral awareness and become accountable for their own behaviour.

Responsibilities of caregivers

Adults are charged with caring for children on God's behalf. They are to pass on a positive legacy and teach and model a Godly life, being held accountable for the protection and proper growth of the generations after them. By showing compassion and gentleness in the way they guide and discipline their children, parents reflect God's nature. Their role is to prepare children for successful living (on God's terms) and responsible adulthood.

¹⁸ This section draws on Nove Väiläau, *A Theology of Children*, 2005.

Further resources

Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand

The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand has zero tolerance on all forms of abuse and no church leader is allowed to use emotional or physical discipline. Complaints of child abuse should always be referred to the police and the Church can offer support and advice in this. Contact Juliette Bowater Employment Advisor Ph (04) 801-6000 Fax (04) 801-6001 Email juliette@presbyterian.org.nz

The Church safety and protection policy can be downloaded at:
<http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/3529.0.html>

Helplines

Jigsaw Child and Family Helpline

0800 228 737

Plunket Line

0800 933 922

Family Violence Information Line

0800 456 450

PVH Domestic Violence Helpline

0800 384 357

CYF 24-hour Line

0508 326 459

Other agencies and websites

Family and Community Services (Ministry of Social Development)

www.familyservices.govt.nz/directory/

Child Protection Services

www.cps.org.nz/page/cps_5.php

Relationship Services

www.relate.org.nz

National Network of Stopping Violence Services

www.nnsvs.org.nz

Jigsaw

www.jigsaw.org.nz

Women's Refuge

www.womensrefuge.org.nz

Preventing Violence in the Home

www.preventingviolence.org.nz

Families Commission

www.familiescommission.govt.nz/

Kids Friendly Churches

www.presbyterian.org.nz/2258.0.html

NZ Family Violence Clearing House

www.nzfvc.org.nz/

The Campaign for Action on Family Violence

www.areyouok.org.nz

Presbyterian Support

www.ps.org.nz

Childsafe

www.childsafe.org.au

Parenting resources

There are many organisations and agencies that offer support and/or education for parents and caregivers, e.g. Parents Inc., Family Life NZ, Parent to Parent, NZ Playcentre Federation, Parent Centres, Plunket.

Further resources

**The New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services “Clearing the Fog” publications
Nov 2005, July 2006.**

www.justiceandcompassion.org.nz/site/searchpub.php

“Beyond Zero Tolerance”, Families Commission, Aug 2005.

<http://www.familiescommission.govt.nz/research/zero-tolerance.php>

**“Children at increased risk of death from maltreatment and strategies for prevention”,
Child, Youth & Family (MSD), July 2006.**

www.cyf.govt.nz/documents/Child_death_from_maltreatment.pdf

“Community Action Toolkit”, Family and Community Services (MSD)

www.areyouok.org.nz/resources.php

Te Awatea Review, Newsletter of Te Awatea Violence Research Centre

www.vrc.Canterbury.ac.nz



Presbyterian Support

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