



Recognizing Child Abuse: A Guide For The Concerned

Douglas J. Besharov

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In recent years, major progress has been made in combating child abuse. Between 1963 and 1999, the number of children reported as suspected victims of child abuse and neglect rose from about 150,000 children to more than 3 million children, a 20-fold increase. Although some of this increase reflects an increase in the amount of child maltreatment in our society, most experts believe that the vast bulk of additional reports is the result of better identification on the part of professionals and laypersons.

As a result, many thousands of children have been saved from death and serious injury. The best estimate is that child abuse and neglect deaths fell from over 3,000 a year (and perhaps as many as 5,000) in the late 1960s to about 1,200 a year in the late 1990s.

Yet, many children continue to fall through the cracks. According to federal government studies, professionals such as physicians, teachers, and day care personnel still fail to report large numbers of the maltreated children they see.

Simply generating more and more reports, however, is not the answer. In recent years, the problem of nonreporting has been compounded by the problem of inappropriate reporting. In 1998, about 65 percent of all reports were labeled "unfounded" after being investigated. (This is in sharp contrast to 1975, when the comparable figure was about 35 percent.) Although rules, procedures, and even terminology vary (some states use the phrase "unfounded", others "unsubstantiated" or "not indicated"), in essence, an "unfounded" report is one that is dismissed after an investigation finds insufficient evidence upon which to proceed.

Some professionals defend the high level of unfounded reports as the necessary price for identifying endangered children. However, the determination that a report is unfounded can be made only after what is often a traumatic investigation and, inherently, a breach of parental and family privacy.

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