
New remedies for child abuse

Increased reporting and federal aid help, but better private initiatives are needed as well, says Douglas J. Besharov

Over the past twenty years, much progress has been made in protecting abused and neglected children. Every State has enacted broad, mandatory child abuse reporting laws and has created specialized "child-protective agencies." The number of children reported to the authorities because of suspected child abuse or neglect rose from 150,000 in 1963 to 1.9 million in 1985. Federal and state expenditures for child protective programs and associated foster care services now exceed \$3.5 billion a year.

Nevertheless, serious gaps in protection remain. Professionals (physicians, nurses, teachers, social workers, child care workers, and police) still fail to report about half of the maltreated children they see. *Each year, about 50,000 children with observable injuries severe enough to require hospitalization are not reported.*

As thousands of children "slip through the cracks," the nation's child protective agencies are also being inundated with unfounded reports. Nationwide, about 60 percent of all reports are "unfounded," that is, they are closed after investigation. This is in sharp contrast to 1975, when about 35 percent of all reports were "unfounded." Each year, over 500,000 American families undergo investigations for reports that are not substantiated.

Unfounded reports are not only unfair to the children and parents involved, they also divert resources from cases of serious danger to children. Thus they threaten to undo much of the progress that has been made in building child-protective programs.

Private philanthropy can play an important role in addressing these problems. For those concerned about the welfare of children, child-protective programs are the core of any comprehensive child welfare system. And for those concerned about undue government intrusion into family life, child-protective programs are a major

example of well-intentioned, but often unjustified, intervention.

Wanting to do something to improve the plight of maltreated children and spending money wisely, though, are two very different matters. Because so few outsiders have any real contact with the child protection system, foundation officials often have difficulty in judging the worthiness of grant applications. As a former grantmaker who has supervised over \$80 million in child abuse grants, I would offer these suggestions to those foundation and individual donors who want to improve their effectiveness in giving to these efforts:

1. *Be wary of research that promises to find "the causes" and "cures" for child abuse.* Dozens of well-funded research projects have tried and failed to discover the cause or causes of child abuse. By now it is generally accepted that, as for all forms of human behavior, there is no one cause of child abuse. Rather, there is a mix of factors which for some parents leads to abuse and, for others, do not. For the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that any research results will be more definitive.

Just as there is no one cause of child abuse, there is no single therapeutic technique or service that can cure it. Instead, there are many effective treatment approaches, whose ability to break patterns of child maltreatment depend on the family, its situation, the quality of the therapist, and a host of other variables.

2. *Support research that evaluates the operational functioning of child-protective programs.* Many children suffer serious injury because the child-protective agency was not able to respond promptly or effectively to a report. Hidden from the public and even agency heads, operational malfunctions usually come to light only when a child's death is widely reported in the media. Operational research can reveal points of delay, staff inadequacies, decision-making

problems, and administrative weaknesses, so that they can be corrected before a child's unnecessary death. A small amount of research money can effect a great deal of program improvement.

3. *Support public awareness and professional education programs that describe what should be reported ... and what should not be reported.* Be wary of public awareness and professional education programs that hype or oversimplify reporting responsibilities.

Needed is a balanced approach that gives potential reporters concrete guidelines about what should be reported. For the general public, brochures and other materials are needed that (1) clarify the state's legal definitions of child abuse and neglect, and (2) give general descriptions of reportable situations, together with specific examples. For professional education, materials are needed that contain more specific information and that are keyed to each profession.

4. *Support on-going training programs based on clearly articulated agency goals.* Effective training is a continuing process of communicating and refining agency goals and policies. Unfortunately, public funds are usually not available for the "luxury" of developing and updating well-crafted policy statements and procedures manuals, which are the indispensable basis for such a training process. In most states, only outside funding can fill the gap. Be wary of training efforts that propose to bring in outside consultants or experts to put on a one- or two- day session for agency employees.

5. *Support efforts of existing mental health, social and family service agencies to treat maltreating parents.* A real expansion of services comes only when established agencies begin serving abusive families. These agencies can bring to bear a range of long-term services tailored to needs of individual families. Thus, the best

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Better private initiatives will reduce child abuse

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way to achieve a lasting expansion of services is to increase the capacity of existing agencies through incremental funding.

Be wary of requests to fund "demonstration" treatment programs for abusive parents. Unfortunately, such demonstration programs are a costly and often counterproductive duplication of pre-existing services. Almost invariably, they last only as long as special funding is available. They spend an inordinate amount of time getting started, finding clients, and winding down. Most importantly, they hold out the implicit promise of a quick cure for parents when what is needed are long-term, intensive services. Too many end up "coordinating" the services of established agencies, thus creating interagency antagonisms and discouraging other community-based agencies from becoming involved with abusive families.

6. *Support efforts to focus more services on abused children.* Many abused children desperately need therapeutic services to compensate for parental deficiencies or to remediate the harm done by past maltreatment. These services include quality infant stimulation programs, Head Start, therapeutic day care, homemaker care, early childhood or child development programs, nutritional services and youth counseling programs. Few child protective programs now offer such services in sufficient amount or quality.

The extent to which child protective agencies, even with relatively unlimited funds, ignore the basic emotional needs of maltreated children was documented by the evaluation of the first round of federally supported demonstration child abuse projects. It found that while most maltreating parents received psychological assess-

ments and special treatment, less than 10 percent of the maltreated children received developmental assessments, and almost none got any remedial treatment. Connecting child protective agencies to child-oriented treatment services needs to have the highest priority everywhere.

Private philanthropy cannot correct all the problems facing the nation's child protective agencies. But through strategic financial support, it can provide leadership to sharpen skills, broaden capacities, and foster innovation: a key role in what should be a public-private partnership to protect abused and neglected children.

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