



by Karen Stephens

For Children's Sake, Prevent and Confront Child Abuse

Imagine an infant crying in her crib — a shrill, piercing, unrelenting cry. You pick her up, she cries. You snuggle, you rock, you coo, she cries. You lay her down again, she cries. You search madly for the pacifier; surely, that will do the trick! But a tiny tongue, dripping with mucus and saliva, propels it in your face! The wailing sirens on and on. Is she hungry? No, she whips her head side to side fighting your attempt to feed. You check the diaper, she's dry. You check her temp, it's normal. Perhaps it's fright — or pain! Did a spider bite her, the cat, the older sibling? Why, oh, why can't babies talk?!

Feeling anxious? I am. Just writing about it knots my stomach, tightens my neck, clenches my jaw. My palms are even sweaty. In these situations parents can go down one of two paths. Neither is easy, but one is a horror.

One path is to hang tough, to ride out the crying jag without shaking, tossing, or hitting the child — come hell or high water. And most parents can do it. They cling tenaciously to patience. Some do it by talking — first to the baby: “There, there, Sweetie. What's wrong? Don't worry, mama's here. What do you need, angel?”

When soothing words flop, parents continue talking — to themselves! “I can do this. Things WILL get better. This, too, shall pass. Dr. Know-It-All says it's a stage all babies go through. He did say that, didn't he?!”

Two parents makes coping with the stress easier. When one runs thin on patience, the other can step in. But tag-teaming only works when both parents are willing, and both are at home. Single parents must be resourceful. Some call a relative or friend for support. Or they muffle the crying by waiting in another room until the little one tires herself to sleep. Most parents, and children, survive the tough times. Of course, the chances are greater if kids are of easy temperament; they don't test parents as often!

But there's another path that can lure parents. When children are perplexing, exasperating, and infuriating, parents can succumb to anger and violence. Feeling abused themselves, parents retaliate, matching a child's wrath, decibel for decibel, flail for flail. Sometimes it works. Abuse scares kids into compliance. But that doesn't make it justifiable or right. In time, abuse backfires, setting the stage for a frightening ballet. Parents withdraw, then explode, withdraw, then explode. Sometimes leading, sometimes following, children join the dance, taking their cues from the parent's mood. Ultimately kids carry the dance into our child cares, schools and businesses.

The macabre choreography provides jobs for social workers, psychologists, police, lawyers, and judges. It robs kids of the sabbatical known as childhood — a fragile time of growth that's a necessary prelude, not a luxury, for a stable adulthood. It's hard to fathom why, once indulged, the dance continues. Obviously hurting a child vents intense emotion, but surely one twirl would shock (scare!) a parent into restraint. Yet often it doesn't. So (I shiver to wonder), does inflicting pain provide a momentary euphoria? Is abuse satisfying, to the point of becoming habitual?

We don't like to say adults “chose” to abuse. We call it impulse, as if abuse is a residual, primitive behavior that over-rides thinking, takes control, and makes us lose our minds. But

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abuse isn't dirty laundry handed down from our evolutionary past. To say instinct drives abuse, rather than free-will decision-making, infers humans are innately evil, that we're at the mercy of genetics. I don't believe a chromosomal stew destines one to hurt children.

Abusing children, especially repetitive abuse, is a behavioral choice, not an accident. Through mind-searing experiences, abuse is taught, often looping from one generation to the next. The cycle is highly resistant to change. Conditions setting the stage for abuse can be cited and examined, but they don't absolve the abuser of his or her actions.

I don't think abuse is merely impulse, but I also don't think it's usually premeditated. It's a wits end, knee-jerk decision, a misfire triggered by anger. In an imperceptible split-second, parents decide to fly off the handle, to use belittling language, to toss, throw, kick, bang, or pound. When parents are pushed against the wall of their limits, abuse must seem a rational choice. It's not of course. But at the moment, it must seem so.

Whether due to panic, fear, selfishness, or even shame, abusers typically choose to protect themselves first, and their children second — if at all. They keep evidence of their offenses, their children's scarlet marks, covered from public view until bruises and wounds heal. Though hard to imagine, kids are rehearsed, taught to fib about injuries.

Parents who abuse can choose to seek help, but they often don't until forced to by child protection laws. Family members can fail to demand an abuser seek help, hoping to keep the abuse a secret — even though they know child abuse is illegal, and more damning, inhumane. Denying reality becomes an unsavory family conspiracy of silence. And so kids lie to neighbors, caregivers, teachers, social workers, and even ministers. Stymied in silence, they fear revealing parents' flaws, fear sending parents to prison, fear landing in foster care. But mostly, kids remain silent or lie because they're afraid of losing their parents' undying love.

Surprise you? It shouldn't. Our society gives greater permission to keep secrets than to seek help. We perpetuate self-defeat. And we condemn kids to years of torment. We're fools to pretend that even the strongest of kids can endure such stress and still end up contented, stable adults, unscathed and undamaged.

From what I've seen, adults can get by with abuse for years. No one wants to point a finger. We believe parents are well intentioned, we give them benefit of the doubt, we preserve a false sense of normalcy instead of facing reality. But we wear our optimistic blinders too long, as we allow children to suffer. Their suffering is guilt we must bear.

To stop abuse we all, especially family members, must be realistic as well as optimistic. There's much we can do to reduce the violence. We must identify abuse early, when it's most treatable. We can reinforce kids' rights to hold offenders, even parents, accountable for their actions. It will earn children's trust.

We must openly discuss abuse and then reach out to help kids be resilient. We can counteract abuse by teaching kids to manage anger constructively and to problem solve cooperatively. We can model self-respect and civil treatment. We must support young parents by lending a sympathetic ear, an empathetic wink, a bit of advice. In doing all that, we'll earn the right to be optimistic about making life safer for kids.

I'm convinced we can keep abuse from eating away at family trees like a crippling fungus. But it will take you, and me, and all who love your children to exert the will to do it.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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