

Dying for Respect

By Stephanie Cowan, Director, Change for our Children

Our children are dying, and suffering maltreatment at the hands of their families, at rates that shame us as a nation. In the month of December, 2008, headlines reported ¹:

- a 16 month-old boy died from intentional head injuries
- a two year old boy was stabbed by his mother
- a young girl was force fed spoonfuls of wasabi and mustard by her father
- a 9-year-old girl was punched in the back of the head by a mother demanding her paper round money
- a 22 month girl choked to death after being hit and smothered by her mother for crying

A Save the Children league table of child maltreatment deaths in rich nations ranks New Zealand third from the bottom (above USA and Mexico) with 1.2 child deaths from maltreatment per 100,000 children annually.² This is ten times worse than the leader nation, Spain. Save the Children New Zealand Executive Director, John Bowis, was quoted as saying, "Tragically, maltreatment deaths are but the tiny tip of a very large iceberg of abuse."

Maltreatment is the term used to describe the range of adult behaviours that can cause injury to children and covers physical, psychological and sexual abuse and neglect.

Who is responsible?

A simple answer to this question would be the perpetrators of the injury and in a direct sense they are. Yet child maltreatment is not random. There are patterns. The literature is summarised in the document 'Preventing Physical and Psychological Maltreatment of Children in Families'³. Reported findings from research indicate that it is more likely when development is rapid, that is, for babies, toddlers and young adolescents, than it is for school-aged children. It happens at higher rates in deprived families and communities compared to those well-resourced, and it is supported in societies slow to intervene or report.

Studies point to a 'triple risk' understanding of child maltreatment. It comes about from a complex interaction of caregiver vulnerability, family and social context and the trigger factors that tip the balance in the moment. These things, together, place the burden of responsibility on us all. Protecting children is everyone's business. When we accept we are part of the problem, we move past blame, can roll up our sleeves and become part of the solution.

¹ <http://familyintegrity.org.nz/category/some-child-abuse-cases-in-nz-since-section-59-amended/>

² http://www.savethechildren.org.nz/new_zealand/newsroom/child_abuse_deaths.html

³ <http://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/literature-reviews/preventing-maltreatment/preventing-maltreatment.pdf>

From abuse to respect

Abuse shares a continuum with respect. They are opposite values. To move away from abuse is to move towards respect. Respect is the vision, respect is the goal, respect is what we must work to strengthen. So what is respect? What does it look like in practice?

In general terms, **respecting** is the nurturing of self-worth in others and **feeling respected** is the experience of feeling worthy (having a voice, a value and a place to stand). The most powerful tool for achieving such an exchange is **listening**. When we listen to understand, to appreciate, to acknowledge, to find good and notice strengths, we practice respect.

I would like to challenge the assumption that 'respect should be earned'. This may be the case when we all start from the same place. But what about when we do not? What about when our reality is that we are disempowered by drug addiction, got pregnant at fourteen, have unrealistic expectations of a child, share a house with fifteen others, have no money, avoid health services for fear of judgment, lost our parents early to a smoking related death, have responsibility for raising the children of siblings, live with a violent partner, have no meaningful work, were abused as a child, have criminal affiliations, a mental health condition? Individuals cannot sustain a sense of their own worth if their environments neglect them. High rates of abusive behaviour points to a paucity of respect in our communities.

We practice respect when our support services and education programmes reach across the boundaries of difference and appreciate and acknowledge people of different abilities, with different pasts, from different world views. When we promote children in a positive light as people and not objects or projects; when we avoid buying into 'put down' language such as 'naughty corners', 'terrible two's', 'controlled crying', 'hell hour', we play a part in building realistic expectations of children as growing in autonomy, needing to explore and contributing to their social worlds. In these practical ways a culture of family respect is nurtured.

Implications for childbirth educators

Childbirth educators have a primary role in promoting respect in families as parent education is one of six primary prevention approaches to reducing child maltreatment. Early intervention with pre-parent or first time parents is key to effectiveness as is information about normal baby crying and child development. Courses that work to change attitudes, increase knowledge and develop skills are more effective than those emphasising any one of these. A positive approach to behaviour change and support for parents to develop confidence and a belief in their own ability to adapt and learn are also more effective.

In conclusion, below are two comments from first time parents attending our parent education course that demonstrate parent to baby respect in practice:

- Tania was at the hospital (her Nana was dying). It was a stinking hot night and Brian wouldn't settle. I was home alone. I walked round for three hours till Brian settled and I put him to bed. I did not get flustered or worried. I just spoke to him and cuddled him. It was empowering" (new father)
- A high point for me was when I started to watch our baby and really started to learn his cues. When you take notice it makes being a mother a wonderful experience. (new mother)