**ABUSE AND NEGLECT**

Child abuse and neglect continue to be serious problems in U.S. society. At some time in their careers, all school personnel are likely to encounter a child who has been maltreated. Through early identification and prevention efforts, educators can play a critical role in

helping these children.

**PREVALENCE OF CHILD MALTREATMENT**

In most instances, acts of child abuse and neglect are initially unknown to anyone except the child and the perpetrator. Given the private nature of these acts, the child’s concern about stigmatization and loss, and the offender’s fear of criminal prosecution, many instances of abuse and neglect are not reported to authorities. Prevalence rates are hard to ascertain,

and are estimated from two sources: reports of substantiated child abuse, and surveys in which adults are asked to recount prior experiences of abuse even if these instances had not been reported when they occurred. For example, **the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) is based on state**

**Child Protective Services (CPS)** reports. Analysis of the data collected in **2000** found three million referrals to CPS, with **879,000** children identified as maltreated. This is a conservative estimate of the problem, however, as it is based solely on counts of reported and substantiated abuse and neglect. Retrospective adult surveys provide a broader base of information, because they include instances of abuse that were never reported to authorities. Finkelhor (1994) reviewed recent adult surveys and concluded that approximately 20% of women and 5% to 10% of men in the United States had experienced some form of sexual abuse as children, with only one third of those cases reported and substantiated. This estimate

did not include instances of physical abuse or neglect. Despite difficulties inherent in developing prevalence rates of abuse and neglect, estimates indicate that it is a serious national problem. Most importantly, the numbers suggest that most school personnel

will encounter children who have been maltreated, although they may not be aware of the identity of these students.

**RISK FACTORS FOR**

**CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT**

There are a number of risk factors associated with maltreatment. Some factors increase the child’s vulnerability to abuse outside the home, while others increase the likelihood of familial abuse or neglect. Finkelhor (1994), in a review of studies on child sexual abuse, notes the following risk factors: unavailability of parents, poor parent-child relationships, and parental instability. He also cites a need for caution, however, as some abused children have none of these risks. Specific risk factors for neglect have also been identified. Peerson (2001) examined differences between neglectful and abusive families and found that neglectful mothers were younger when they had their children, had less education, and had higher

levels of depression and parenting stress than the mothers of children who had been abused. In a recent review of the literature, Gaudin and Dubowitz (1996)

identified the following risk factors for neglect:

Maternal age

Depression

Passivity

Poor knowledge of child development

High stress

Poor coping skills

Social isolation

An underlying deficit in social competence

Poverty is a risk factor common to all types of maltreatment. The association between poverty and maltreatment may be confounded, however, by the access that social service agencies have to poorer families. That is, poverty may be associated with maltreatment because families from middle and upper socioeconomic classes are able to more effectively protect themselves from public scrutiny. Until this issue is addressed, school personnel should not rule out the possibility of abuse or neglect among children with greater financial resources. Students in special education are at greater risk for maltreatment than are other students. In a study of prevalence rates for abuse within a large, Midwestern city, Sullivan and Knutson (2000) found that children with disabilities were 3.4 times more likely to be maltreated than were their nondisabled peers. Sobsey (2002) identified three ways in which abuse and disability could be associated. First, abuse and neglect may increase the child’s need for special education. For example, children who are neglected or abused are likely to miss more school than are other children, and are more likely to have physical and emotional problems that impair their learning. Second, factors such as parental substance abuse, poverty, and violence in the home may increase the risk of both child abuse and having a disability. Finally, the presence of a disability may make children more vulnerable to abuse because they lack the skills to avoid or escape a would-be offender. While a majority of children with disabilities

are not abused, educators need to be aware of their vulnerability to maltreatment.

**Characteristics Identified as Possible Signs**

**of Maltreatment**

**Academic problems**

Delayed/limited language development

Poor concentration

Frequent truancy or tardiness

5. **Social or behavioral problems**

Social isolation or aggression

Frequent misunderstandings of social situations

Avoidance or clinginess to the teacher

Psychological distress

Depression or anxiety

Low self-esteem

**Family problems**

Fear of parents

Wanting to stay at school; runaway status

**Physical signs**

Frequent unexplained bruises

Unmet physical needs

**Sexual behavior**

Higher levels of sexual knowledge than expected for age

Sexualized activity or early pregnancy

Adapted from C. Crosson-Tower (2002) and M. Veltman &

K. Browne (2001).