



better  
better parenting  
better communities  
parent

**THE POLICE MANAGERS' GUILD**

THE POLICE AND THE COMMUNITY



# INTRODUCTION

Parenting is an awesome responsibility, but one that can be enormously rewarding. When we become parents, we get the unique opportunity to encourage and inspire a new generation of adults who care about themselves, each other and their environment - and thereby creating better and safer communities. Families - whether big, small, one-parent or two - are at the core of our communities.

The values and attitudes that prevail in our homes are the values and attitudes reflected in our communities. That is why the Police Managers Guild, who have sponsored this booklet, believe it is important that parents receive positive information that will help them not only become better parents,

but also enjoy the experience. This booklet is not intended to be a manual for parenthood, because parenting can never be "done by the book". However, it contains many useful tips that might help you develop yourself as a positive role model for your children. It might help you cope with the inevitable stresses and help you give your children the care and attention all children deserve. If we have safe, happy families, we have safe, happy communities - that's our goal.

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President

The Police Manager's Guild

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# Effective Parenting

Our children are our future, and we have the awesome responsibility of being their guardians. But it is also a lot of fun, if we allow it to be.

Often we feel powerless to change behaviour that we see as "bad", or we feel frustrated at children who won't "do what they're told". These feelings are not new, as our own parents, grandparents and generations before us could testify.

However, parenting is a responsibility that requires great care and patience. We have a responsibility as parents to look after our children, and none of us wants to get it wrong.

If we have the fortune or foresight to have a planned child, we have a good start. We can then think about what it is that we are getting ourselves into before committing ourselves. What adjustments will we need to make to our lives? Who is going to look after the child, when modern society often demands that parents must work to survive?

Do we really know enough about children to take on this responsibility? And do we know enough about ourselves? Can we cope when life might seem tough already? Is there a good reason for having a child? - it must never be seen as a solution to relationship problems that are already under stress, for example.

Even if a pregnancy is unplanned, we can still prepare for the future of our child, so they come into the world loved and wanted. Good planning can reduce some of the inevitable stresses of parenthood.

## We can't get it right all the time

No parent can do everything right all the time. If you have a friend or relative that you admire as a parent, try asking them how they do it. Most likely they will tell you that they don't believe they are doing it right, that they are always having problems with their children in one way or another.

All parents want the best for their children. It might seem ironic in the case of a parent who abuses his or her child, but it is simply an extreme example of a parent who gets things horribly wrong. We can love but still cause such terrible hurt to our children - sometimes without realising it.

If we want the best for our children, why don't we do our best?

Is it because we see our children simply as possessions with whom we can do as we wish? Is it because we don't give them enough time out of our busy day? Is it because we don't talk to them? Are we too "adult" to say that we love them every now and then?

It's OK when we try, but still don't seem to get it right. The value is in the effort, and the rewards might not be obvious straight away. But a kind word when previously there was a harsh word can work wonders for a child's confidence and the parent/child relationship.

We're not alone in the parenting world of hard knocks and we can't spend our lives trying to prove to ourselves or others that we can do it all. Anyway, there is often no "right way", because parents and children are individuals, and have individual needs.

What we can do, is become more aware of how we can become better parents and begin to apply some useful tips.

We can read booklets such as this and others available from help agencies; talk to other parents, educators, friends and relatives; attend parenting courses, and observe those parents we admire.

## There are no typically good or bad parents

Good and bad parents exist in all cultures and socio-economic environments. Money, for instance, does not guarantee better parenting. It just means that the issues are sometimes different.

If a child is being neglected in an area of great poverty because parents are out of work, or if a child is being neglected in an area of great wealth because the parents are always at work, the neglect still exists. The result is likely to be the same - a child who will run off the rails.

Good parenting is not something that can be bought. Good parenting is an attitude. It is unconditionally caring for a child simply because you are responsible for that child. It is still caring when the child gets into trouble or is disobedient.

Parents sometimes blame their apparent lack of parenting skills on their environment or circumstances. "I have to work all day and I'm tired out at night"; or "I never have the money to do anything for the kids".

The stresses of modern life are undeniable, but if we want to be better parents and change life for the better for our children, then we must make the change ourselves. It is likely to be a change in us, as parents, that will bring about a change in our children.

If we are struggling to give our children our time and love, we must GET HELP. It is a key message of this booklet.

There is no shame in asking for help. Parenting is not easy and no one expects you to do it all on your own. We all need help sometimes - for families who have children with special needs, it might be that we need help all the time.

*DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK.*

There are many agencies, both Government and private, that are available 24 hours a day to help parents (see the back of this booklet). Some organisations have 24-hour phone numbers that you can ring - maybe you just want to get a problem off your chest, or you need to know where you can get further help.

Your greatest source of help, however, might be someone you know on a more personal level - a friend, relative, neighbour, teacher, counsellor.... They can help you make decisions and give you perspectives that you might not otherwise see.

# Leading by Example

What we see in the mirror is what we can expect our children to be. Is the person we see angry, stressed, depressed or tired? Does this person talk to their children, give them their time and love, and look after herself or himself?

What we are is what our children can become, because our children learn behaviour from us. If we hit our children, they are likely to hit their children. Children who live in abusive families are more likely to be aggressive and violent.

We can break the cycle by changing the way we act and react with our children.

Most of us will have seen the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service campaign aimed at "breaking the cycle". The child sits in his high chair as the parents argue and abuse each other. And the youngster who is yelled at for spilling the milk throws the stone through the glasshouse.

When children are brought up in this kind of environment, they will believe that such behaviour is normal. They will believe that when you're angry and upset, you can hit out.

By changing our behaviour around children, we can give them positive messages that reinforce their confidence and self worth, and it is more likely they will continue those positive messages with their children.

## Hitting does not work

In New Zealand, hitting a child is still seen by many parents as a legitimate part of parenting. The law (Section 59 of the Crimes Act, 1961) exempts parents from an assault charge when they use "reasonable force" in disciplining their children.

However, a study by the Office of the Commissioner for Children showed that 2 percent of a random sample of more than 300 parents said they had given their child "a really severe thrashing" and 11 percent reported they had "hit with a strap, stick, or something similar".

The law does not allow adults to hit each other, nor does it allow teachers or others outside the family to hit children.

Some groups actively encourage hitting as a form of discipline for children, with one group suggesting recently that children aged seven could safely receive spankings up to 30 times a day with a leather strap.

However, welfare agencies throughout New Zealand promote effective alternatives, arguing that hitting does not teach children how to behave, but how to hit.

The Office of the Commissioner for Children says no matter how hard it gets, it's never OK to hit children. The Office argues that children should have the same protection and dignity as other people in the community. It says using physical force teaches children that it is OK to use violence to solve an argument, show anger or influence others.

The Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service has a pamphlet, Parenting Without Hitting, that provides practical alternatives to resolve tense situations and encourage good behaviour. A video of the same name is available for a small fee from CYPFS, and is also produced in a Maori and Samoan version.

The video is of value not just for parents who hit their children. It also looks at ways of encouraging positive behaviour in children and enjoying the role of parenting. It features real parents who talk about their stresses and how they feel about parenting.

If there are effective alternatives, why do parents still hit their children?

One argument is that physical discipline is swift and encourages instant remorse. However, if it is successful in changing a child's behaviour, the change only occurs because the child is fearful of being hurt. In some cases, especially small children, they might not even know why they are being hit.

If hitting is intended as a lesson, it cannot be effective if children become fearful and resentful.

Hitting also tends to have a reduced effect the more it is administered. The more a child is hit, the less effective it becomes, and the more likely it is that a parent will hit harder to get the desired reaction.

Hitting is not only a response to a "naughty" child, but is also often an outlet for a parent's frustrations.

The stressed parent who is not coping well with work or the lack of it, with a relationship or whatever, can often strike a child without the child having done anything wrong.

In some cases, the hitting is sustained and brutal, leading to long-term injury, psychological and emotional harm, and even death. Some of these children are not even old enough to know what the parent considers right or wrong.

The alternatives to hitting require patience, but the rewards are worth the effort.

If you think you are going to hit a child, take a few deep breaths and:

- Slow down.

- Think about what you are doing.
- Think about what harm you could do.
- Put your child in a safe place if needed.
- Phone a friend or someone you trust.
- Put on some of your favourite music (preferably calming music).
- Think about joining a parenting course - it will give you lots of ideas and methods of coping.
- Try to figure out why your child is misbehaving.
- Hit a pillow if you're still mad (out of sight of the child).

## **It's not just hitting**

Hitting is not the only way we can harm our children. We can hurt them with words said in the heat of the moment - swearing, yelling and putting them down as people in their own right. We can also hurt them by fighting and arguing in front of them.

Research shows the effects of emotional and psychological abuse can be just as harmful and long-term as physical abuse. In such circumstances, our children grow up to believe that abuse is a means of solving problems. Can we blame them if, when they grow older, they want to take out their frustrations with us in the same way? Many teenagers grow up to abuse their parents, but worst of all, they become adults who repeat the cycle with their children - your grandchildren.

## **Alternatives to hitting, yelling and put-downs**

Children are just human beings who have not grown up yet. They have much to learn, and as parents we can teach them a great deal.

We can teach them that some behaviour is not appropriate. We might get them to change their behaviour by hitting and verbal abuse, but they will be angry and confused themselves. Some of the side-effects for children will be:

- Fear, including fear for others.
- A feeling of worthlessness leading to self-criticism.
- Self blame and feeling responsible for being hurt or others being hurt.
- Taking it out on others with bullying and other anti-social behaviour.
- Anxiety, depression or withdrawal.
- A need to act like a parent, caring for other children or parenting the parent.

So we must use alternatives whenever possible. The first thing we can do is stop and think about whether it is something the child has done that makes us feel like we need to deal with them. The sound of a child playing at the end of the day when we might feel at the end of our tether could get on our nerves, but it is not the child's behaviour that is to blame. If we pause to think first, we might find that the child has nothing to do with how we feel.

In such cases, either deal with what is causing you to feel the way you are, or take yourself or the child out of harm's way while you cool down.

There's a saying in carpentry: "Measure twice, cut once." In parenting, we might need to think twice before doing something that cannot be undone.

If we do make a mistake, we must be "adult" enough to admit it and apologise to our children. They will respect us more for it and are likely to have more compassion for us when things get rough.

In some cases of misbehaviour, it might even be appropriate to do nothing. We might not like what the child is doing, but if it is not hurting anyone, it might be best to ignore it. Sometimes, children will find out for themselves that what they do is not appropriate. Behaviour can sometimes be self-correcting. If a child fails to put clothes in the laundry, for example, they have only themselves to blame when their clothes are not clean the next day.

When we do need to deal with a child's behaviour:

- Keep calm.
- Recognise that it's OK to be angry, but focus on the behaviour, not the person.
- Use positive messages, reinforcing what you want them to DO, not what you DON'T want them to do and be clear about the behaviour you want, ie: "Keep your toys in your room", not "Don't leave your toys lying around".
- Tell your child without yelling or screaming.
- Give the message that the behaviour is bad, not the child. If you want the child to change their behaviour, you will need to provide some guidance. Tell them what they did wrong and what you expect next time.

- Let them do some of the talking and listen to what they say. They might have a good reason to feel they are being picked on.
- Try distraction. Give the child something else to do.
- Make a game of it and take it to the absurd, ie: "If you had helped do the dishes Dad wouldn't have hit his head on the sink and he wouldn't have had to go to hospital and we wouldn't have had that car crash with the prime minister and then that silly law about putting kids in jail wouldn't have been passed in Parliament...." It's a great way of easing the tension for both of you.
- If you need to correct behaviour, take away a treat or privilege, such as television or visits to a friend. Be clear about why it is being taken away and for how long, and stick to it.

CYPFS also suggests the "Time Out" technique when a child continues to behave badly. It is a technique where a parent simply puts the child in a safe place where nothing is happening. Two or three minutes is usually enough time for everyone to cool down (but one minute for each year of the child's age is a good suggestion). Tell the child calmly what you are doing and why. Set a timer if you have one, but wait until a child having a tantrum quiets down. When the time is up, open the door and say: "You can come out now." The incident is over, so don't refer to it again. "Time out" is a practical solution to continuing bad behaviour and gives both the child and parent time to calm down.

## Positive messages

Children will not be "good" all the time. We sometimes need to take steps to correct their behaviour, but we also need to ensure they are aware of good behaviour. Be positive when you talk to your children about their behaviour.

- Take time to think about what your rules and values are and then make sure your child knows them. Tell them why those rules and values are important. Don't expect your child to follow rules that are not adequately explained.
- Praise your child often for good behaviour. They will feel good about pleasing you and will want to repeat the good behaviour.
- Thank them for their efforts, even if they sometimes get things wrong.
- Look for things your child is good at and comment on it. Often we fail to see the positive side of children.
- Recognise that they will sometimes fail to do things right, even when they try hard. It is only a learning process, so be supportive. Never put a child down for trying.
- Reward good behaviour with hugs, smiles or simply showing an interest. Save the tangible things like lollies and toys for birthdays or other special occasions.
- Give children confidence in themselves by letting them make some decisions that affect them, ie: "Would you prefer the red dress or the green one today?"

## It's OK to be angry

The strategies outlined in this booklet are not designed to stop you getting angry. Anger is a natural response - a child needs to be aware that some things will make you angry and upset. It is how you manage your anger that is important.

Hitting, yelling and being abusive is not a healthy response to bad behaviour. Tell your child that you are angry, make sure they know why you are angry, and make sure they know what you expect from them in future.

Direct your anger at the behaviour, not the person. It is not the child that you do not like, it is the behaviour.

# What is 'Naughty' Anyway?

Children come into the world embarking on a voyage of discovery. As captain of the ship, you can plot the course with care or let the ship drift wherever the sea will take it.

Of course, even adults never stop learning, but a young child is full of wonder at the world and what it has to offer. Along the way there is pain and sorrow, but for a young child there is often confusion as well. Why are they being told they are "naughty" for wanting to touch some new discovery on a supermarket shelf, or for getting into the cupboards?

For older children and teenagers, with independence come choices. Sometimes the choices will be mistakes, but if they are treated as mistakes and not "bad" behaviour, something will be learned from the experience.

In the early years, children's absorbent minds are soaking up information, not only from their physical environment, but also from those closest to them - most likely you as the parent. We should not blame children for wanting to make discoveries. They will make mistakes along the way, as we all do, but we must be there when they make them, so they will learn from those mistakes.

It doesn't mean we should simply let them do whatever they want - but we must be their guides, not their masters.

It is normal for young children to:

- Get into cupboards and take things out.
- Leave toys all over the house.
- Wet or dirty their nappies or pants.
- Refuse to eat.
- Play with the dials on the television and other appliances.
- Refuse to share.
- Be messy.
- Jump on the furniture.
- Refuse to go to bed.
- Have temper tantrums.
- Unpot the plants.
- Scribble on books and the wallpaper.
- Spill food.
- Fight with brothers and sisters.

It might be frustrating when these things happen and we are busy or stressed, but they will happen nonetheless. How we react is important.

Keeping calm and recognising that our children are not being "naughty", but that their behaviour is normal (though also at times inappropriate), is the key. When we react with anger and aggression, we show our children this is how we deal with stress.

If this is how we have always reacted, we might be pleasantly surprised by children's behaviour when we talk calmly with them.

## Be prepared

Knowing that our children are going to do things that annoy us or are inappropriate gives us a head start. In the beginning, at least, we are smarter than they are. We can be prepared and outwit them. Our home is where they will spend most of their time. When babies arrive, we might have a bassinet or cot for them to sleep in and a room decorated. As they grow older, there might be a highchair, but once they are past the toddler stage, they are often expected to cope in the big people's world.

Providing child-size furniture can make a difference. Children who cannot see what they are doing at the handbasin, or have to mess up a kitchen table when they want to draw can get frustrated and angry. They want to be creative and they want to do things for themselves, but if we don't prepare the environment, we are looking for trouble.

Consider getting a few items that will give your child a sense of independence and that you don't need to use yourself. Some of these things can be bought cheaply at garage sales and second-hand stores:

- A child-size table and chair for reading at, drawing, painting, eating at - something that can be messed up.
- A small step or stool that a child can easily carry around so they can reach the things they need (keep those things you don't want them to get out locked away or up high) - for going to the toilet, at the handbasin, at the kitchen bench, to reach books etc.
- A small wardrobe or cupboard so children can get their own clothes in or out.

- Low shelves for toys and books.
- Make sure the cot or bed is low enough for the child to get in and out - try taking the legs off a normal bed and keep the base off the floor with solid blocks of wood or clean bricks.

Knowing that children will naturally get into mischief, be prepared by distracting them, keeping things out of their reach, or giving them alternatives.

If they get into cupboards, childproof the latches or put rubberbands around the handles so they can't be opened by young children. Try putting old pots and pans in a toybox or a cupboard in the child's room.

If they leave toys all over the house, make a routine or game of picking them up at a set hour. Make sure they have a toy box or shelf for toys.

If they play with the television and other appliances, give them an alternative, such as an old radio, they can play with in their room. Make sure it works, so they don't become easily frustrated with it.

If they are messy, put paper down first and restrict the available space.

If they jump on the furniture, let them have cushions or beanbags in their room.

If they have temper tantrums, put them somewhere safe until they cool down on their own.

If they unpot the plants, keep them out of the way or let them help you repot them. They are less likely to want to undo their own work.

If they scribble on books and the wallpaper, let them scribble on old paper at their table.

It doesn't mean you have to accept that it's alright to do some of these things. Children still need guidelines and to know that what they are doing is inappropriate.

## Set the rules

It is up to you to establish the rules you want your child to stick to. For young children it can be quite straight-forward, for teenagers you will need to provide some opportunities for them to make their own choices and learn to take responsibility for their behaviour.

Some parents use rules to control their children and to exert their power. These parents are likely to lay down the law and punish misconduct often. They are also likely to show little affection for their children, because it might seem that they are "soft".

Others let their children do almost as they please. They probably don't show any feelings of anger or even irritation. Without guidelines and discipline from parents, children are likely to lack direction and self-discipline.

Ideally parents will set limits to behaviour, and negotiate the rules and the consequences. They will listen to children and observe their behaviour so they might better understand why they sometimes misbehave.

Some parents set too many rules and find themselves saying "no" all the time. Their child will always be "naughty" because they are always breaking the rules. When they get the tag of the "bad girl" or "bad boy", they can live out the role, believing they have nothing to lose because they're always breaking the rules anyway.

Be realistic about rules, so you can "pick your fights". Choose the important rules, make a list and keep them to a minimum. Is it really important if children have their elbows on the table?

Involve your child in the process - you might be surprised at how even young children can accept rules when they feel they have "negotiated" some of them. Explain them clearly, then stick to them.

Talk to your partner about the rules, too, so you can both be firm and consistent.

Don't set things up for the rules to be broken. As mentioned previously, keep things out of the way if you don't want children to have them. If they can't get them, they can't be tempted to break the rules.

## Letting go sometimes

Having rules does not mean keeping a tight rein on what our children do. We all want the best for our children, but we must let them be individuals, make their own mistakes and enjoy their triumphs.

We can help them through life by:

- Letting them help with some of the things we do.
- Letting them choose their own activities some of the time.
- Letting them choose their own friends.
- Hearing what they have to say about things - this does not mean you will always let them have things their own way.
- Accepting some their likes and dislikes.
- Being willing to compromise sometimes.
- As they grow, giving them tasks and responsibilities.
- Understanding that there are a lot of different ways in which young people say who they are.
- understanding how important the views and approval of their friends are.

- Appreciating and enjoying who your children are - they won't be the same as you.
- Standing by them through troubled patches.
- Celebrating young people's successes, however small they are.

# What our Children Say

Who better than our children to guide us in our efforts to be better parents. Perhaps we should listen more to what they have to say about us.

The following suggestions, contained in a leaflet produced by the Office of the Commissioner for Children, give some interesting comments from primary and intermediate-age children about how adults could help them be well behaved.

- Talk things over with me.
- Spend time with me.
- Listen to me and respond.
- When I am angry, let me cool down.
- Don't put me down, tease me or insult me.
- Be fair.
- Be sure I understand.
- Show me what you want.
- Show me you like me.
- Keep your promises.
- Don't hit or abuse me.
- Don't expect me to do things I can't do.
- Don't scream at me - just tell me.
- Notice when I behave well, praise me and give me rewards.
- Say you are sorry when you get things wrong.
- Don't get too angry.
- Give me help when I need it.
- Don't over-react to my mistakes.
- Notice me.
- Let me have my way sometimes.
- Don't have favourites.
- Meet me halfway.
- Have a sense of humour.
- Understand me.
- Give everyone a say.
- Encourage me.
- Talk over problems.
- Set a good example.
- Be firm when you need to be, but don't be nasty.
- Don't treat me like a baby.

# The Supermarket Dilemma

Supermarkets have the classic environment for parent/child public confrontations. How many times have you found yourself wondering what to do with a screaming child as you try to do your shopping? Or wondering what to do when you see a parent abusing a child in the supermarket aisle?

Children need to be kept occupied with activities when they are out shopping. Their natural tendency is to move, touch and explore. The very reason that supermarkets can cause such stress - that there is so much to distract children - can be used to parents' advantage.

Try giving children responsibility for some aspects of the shopping, or play shopping games. Get them to choose the best apples or cheapest tomatoes, or see how many products they can find that carry a particular brand name. Who can see the toothpaste first? If the child can read, let them tick off your grocery list.

Encourage children to participate by talking about what is happening around them and thinking about the chore you have to complete.

Take a favourite book or toy, or a piece of fruit to keep them distracted. Read the book (or tell a memorised story) at the checkout and let the child help with some of the verses. Play "I spy" and get the child to guess what you see at the checkout.

If you find items at the checkout designed to entice children, ask the supermarket to remove them and put them on the supermarket shelves, where you can avoid them if necessary.

Don't get upset about behaviour that is not going to hurt the child or someone else. Ignore it if it does not embarrass you or bother other people. Praise good behaviour and point out good behaviour in other children.

Stop bad behaviour immediately and make sure the child is aware that you will not tolerate it in public. If they have a temper tantrum, leave your trolley with staff or an obliging shopper and take the child out of the store to a quiet place. Tell the child that the behaviour is inappropriate and wait until they calm down. If necessary, go to the car with them and wait it out. Then ask if they are ready to behave properly.

Before you set out, consider whether you really need to take the child. If they are tired or irritable already, leave the shopping until a better time or leave them with a babysitter. Make sure they eat before you leave, so they won't pester you for treats.

Discuss the behaviour you expect when you go shopping. Consider a small reward that you might buy as you leave the store, or discuss some activity you might do on the way home.

If you are in a two-parent family, try to time your shopping so both parents can join in. One can shop while the other keeps the child occupied.

Shopping with a friend can help keep you distracted and more relaxed. If the friend also has children, discuss your strategies with them. It can be fun to compare how your respective children react to different ideas.

## When you see it happening

It's no fun seeing a parent hitting their children or yelling at them while shopping. Do you ignore it or intervene?

If you decide to intervene, what are you going to do or say?

Remember firstly, that the parent is probably acting that way because of some kind of stress. If you step in and tell them what a bad parent they are, you are likely to cop a fair bit of abuse yourself, and the child could get the blame for the incident.

It might be better to offer some assistance to the parent. Suggest that you hold the child or look after them for a couple of minutes while the parent gets at least some shopping done on their own or gets the chance to cool down. Such an approach recognises the parent's stress and indirectly offers some sympathy.

You might suggest to the parent some of the strategies outlined in the previous section, or take a copy of this booklet with you when you go shopping so you can pass it on.

Use words that convey sympathy for the parent's plight. "Your child is really making it difficult for you - can I help?" would be a good way to start. Sometimes it will help if you simply strike up a conversation to divert the parent's attention until everyone has calmed down.

If you work in a store where you see a parent hitting or abusing a child, advise them that the store is a safe environment where such behaviour is not condoned.

Obviously if a child's well-being is directly at risk because of a beating or severe verbal abuse, step in to stop it immediately and notify the store staff. They should then call the Police to have the matter dealt with (see Police response, later in this booklet).

# Healthy Parents, Healthy Children

If we look after ourselves, we have a greater chance of coping with stress and looking after our children well. If we can balance our own health and wellbeing with other elements of our life such as work, pleasure, relationships and personal growth, we have a good chance of dealing with the challenges that are thrown our way.

Are we too busy to look after ourselves? Do we put the balance out of kilter by working too much, for instance, and not devoting any time to ourselves?

Again, if this is what we show our children, this is likely to be what they will copy. Do we want them to grow up believing work is all that is important?

We must make time for ourselves.

If we are bringing up children alone, we especially need time out. Ask friends and family to help look after the children when you need time for yourself - and not just so you can do the shopping or complete chores. Sometimes you will just need a break to relax alone. Keep in touch with friends, join groups and get involved in activities outside the home.

If you have a partner, nurture the relationship. Sometimes the best thing a child can have is parents with a stable and loving relationship. Make time for your relationship, as you do for your children. Share the load of parenthood and discuss how you might better cope with the stresses together. Enjoy parenting and congratulate yourselves regularly for what you are achieving with your children. Share your children's achievements as a family.

A CYPFS booklet called *There are no Superparents* suggests parent who feel good about themselves:

- Play with the children and set aside family "happy times".
- Have supportive family members and community networks.
- Have a goal in life.
- Do some sort of regular exercise.
- Have hobbies.
- Get a good feeling when they do well.
- Accept that small mistakes happen from time to time, and learn from them.
- Provide healthy food for their family.
- Look for ways to get the best out of people, instead of concentrating on their faults.

## Get involved

New Zealanders have always been proud of their sporting prowess and "give-it-ago" attitude. Now more than ever, however, it is recognised that participation in sport and leisure activities is good not only for the individual, but also for the community.

People involved in regular sport or leisure activities get fit, generally have healthier lifestyles, meet people, find a sense of value in fair play, set goals, enjoy the outdoors. Though time is often limited, it's well worth the effort of joining a local sports group or just getting some regular exercise out walking with a friend. Such activities give you the opportunity to get away from the stresses of home life, and help you better cope with them when you get back.

Make time for leisure. Work out with your partner how much time you will spend away - and whether it will involve social activities after the game or walk. You might have to compromise so you both have a chance to participate.

Think about coaching or refereeing sports teams. Most clubs and organisations will provide training. Consider also social and cultural activities. Expand your mind as well as your skills and self esteem by joining a local drama group, an ethnic group or a book club. Ask around or visit your local community centre to see what activities are in your area.

Making contacts through community or sports groups can be enormously valuable. You will find new friends, perhaps someone to confide in when you need to, someone who might get you a job or one better than the one you are in now ... the possibilities are endless.

## Alcohol and drugs

Anyone who has been a parent knows it's not an easy task. When things get on top of you, turning to drugs and/or alcohol will not provide the help you need.

The effects of drugs and alcohol on your health and the way they affect your judgment are well documented. You are not looking after yourself if you take illegal drugs or over-indulge in alcohol. Your ability to operate effectively as a responsible parent can be significantly affected.

If your doctor prescribes drugs for a medical condition, ask how they will affect you and your ability to

look after your children. If you already have difficulty coping, tell your doctor.

If you have a problem or someone close to you has a problem with drugs or alcohol, seek help. Call one of the help agencies listed at the end of this booklet and take the first step to improving your and your family's health and well-being.

## **How to tell if you're not coping**

The Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service, in its *There are no Superparents* booklet, says it's normal to have bad feelings every now and then.

However, when they seem to be taking over, it's time to talk about them and ask for help. The warning signs that tell us it's time to slow down, take a break or ask for help can be:

- If you have more bad feelings than good, and they seem to be lasting longer and getting stronger.
- If you can't face getting out of bed in the mornings - a real dread of coping with the new day.
- If you cry more than usual and you feel confused about this.
- If you have feelings of anger, panic or despair when the baby cries and you feel like you might lose control and hit the child or try to hurt them.
- If you can't think of any fun things to do with the child. You feel too depressed and exhausted.
- If you feel utterly trapped and alone and can't talk to anyone because no one understands.
- If you think the child would be better off without you.
- If you feel anxious and then angry when the baby cries.
- If you and your partner are arguing a lot or fighting.
- If your partner leaves you alone to cope when you have problems with your children.
- If you feel angry when the child dirties a nappy.
- If you feel one of the children is especially bad.
- If you are afraid to be alone with your child.
- If you feel there are times when you can't cope and have no one to turn to.
- If you feel the children demand too much when you get home from work
- If you leave the house when the children are arguing or crying.

CYPFS also says fathers especially should recognise warning signs such as:

- If you find it hard to show any feelings except anger or sexual feelings.
- If you feel you're only a money machine that must grind on.
- If you'd rather go to the pub than go home and face the kids.
- If you feel it's not your job to help your partner change nappies or do the housework.
- If you feel it's your partner's job to look after the children.
- If you are hitting or hurting your partner or children or finding it hard to control your anger.
- If you always feel frustrated and unimportant after dealing with your boss or other people in power.
- If you feel you have no power over your life.

# The Teenagers Years

The teenage years can be upon parents suddenly and sometimes without warning. It can seem like overnight that the child who could be coaxed and guided is now asserting their independence and tossing out some of the rules you so easily imposed before.

It can be a shock for parents to find their children wanting to make their own choices about clothes and friends. It is, however, just the next step in growing up, with a new set of challenges.

Recognise firstly, that it can be a confusing time for teenagers. Change is happening rapidly - physically, sexually, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. Don't ignore those changes.

The most important single thing you can do (and keep doing, no matter what), is to keep in contact with your teenager by making time to talk about issues that affect them. You will often be busy or not want to interfere in your teenager's life, but you cannot afford to give up your responsibility as a parent.

Teenagers are no longer children, but they are not yet adult. Talking to them regularly, even if they do not appear to want to talk, will keep you in touch with their needs and keep the communication lines open for when they might really need you.

Listen to your teenager if you want them to listen to you.

It's natural for teenagers to push the limits, testing the boundaries of your patience and your values.

Accept that this is part of growing up, and don't take it personally.

However, make sure your teenager realises you still have limits. Discuss them, why you feel the limits are important, and that they are there because you are concerned for your teenager's well-being.

Teenagers still need limits to feel safe. Be consistent with them.

Despite what they might want, you still have a responsibility as a parent to care for your teenager. You might also be responsible for, and liable for, their actions. You can teach your teenager how to make responsible decisions by making responsible decisions yourself.

Don't be afraid to say no. Some teenagers need you to say no - the teenager afraid of going to a party because of the likelihood of trouble can sometimes avoid losing face with peers if a parent rules it out.

Image is important to a teenager. How they perceive their friends to see them can be a powerful influence. Recognise that the clothes they wear are simply reflecting their wish to be independent. Of course, you might not like the clothes, but is it really hurting anyone (except, perhaps, your own sense of good taste!).

You will need to have an open mind as the parent of a teenager. You might do well to reflect on your own teenage years and what you did then.

Pick your fights. Don't battle with your teenager over everything you do not like. Work out what is important, set the rules and stick with it. If you are constantly arguing, it's more likely your teenager will turn to friends (who they think really understand) if they need help, when it should be you.

Don't be a prude. Sex education is discussed in explicit detail at school, so be prepared to tackle the issue in the same way at home. Don't leave sex education to the schools - your values and guidance are still the most important in your child's life.

Admit your mistakes and apologise if you want your teenager to do the same. Trust your teenager and they might surprise you. Always look for the best in them, even if it is not always obvious.

## Alcohol and drugs

The reality of modern life is that teenagers are sooner or later confronted with alcohol and drugs. It is not only how your teenagers handle the issue, but also how you, as a parent, react that is important.

Keeping the communication lines open is critical. It's not always easy and they might not want to listen, but if you talk openly and avoid criticism, you will earn their respect. Tell them that if they are not coping with something in their life, they can talk to you or someone they trust - alcohol or drugs will not provide the answer.

Make sure you know where your teenager is at all times. If you don't know where they are, you won't know what they are doing. You need to know that they are safe.

Make sure your teenager knows your rules about alcohol and drugs. Take a reasonable stance. Banning any alcohol consumption might not work, but if you allow them to drink moderate amounts at home where you can supervise, they might be less likely to over-indulge away from home.

Explain the risks they take with their health, with the law and with you (the consequences if they break the rules). Be consistent and if the rules are broken, show them that you mean what you say. And don't be a hypocrite by drinking too much or taking illegal drugs yourself. Your teenager will be quick to point out that if it is good enough for you, it is good enough for them.

The Alcohol Advisory Council, in a leaflet entitled Alcohol & Your Kids, says young people tend to drink more when their parents are not around. However, you have a responsibility to protect them from

harm, so you sometimes need to enlist the help of other adults to ensure teenagers are supervised at parties.

The Council says there is no "right time" to introduce young people to alcohol, though research indicates the later they are involved the better. Be guided by your own child's interest in alcohol. Don't push it.

When they go to parties, discuss your concerns and agree to some conditions. Take account of their age and maturity. Talk to the host's parents to see how the party will be supervised, what alcohol will be available and how people will get home.

Tell them that if things get out of control, you can always pick them up. Talk about the possibility of the person driving them home being drunk; violence or drugs at the party; or of your teenager feeling threatened or frightened. Discuss a plan for them to leave if they need to without losing face.

The *Alcohol & Your Kids* leaflet suggests:

- Tell them they can phone you at any time and you will pick them up.
- Give them a phone card or get a HOME 0800 number so they can ring you from any phone, even if they have no money.
- Give them some emergency money so they can get a taxi home.
- Organise a car pool with the parents of your teenager's friends.
- Discuss in advance what should happen when they get home. For example, many parents want to know that their teenager is safely home before going off to sleep. You might arrange for them to let you know that they are home.

If you are hosting a party, work out:

- Who is coming, including how many.
- How they will be invited.
- Will alcohol be provided? If so, how much and what kind?
- What other drinks/food will be available?
- How will you deal with alcohol brought by guests?
- Who will serve the drinks?
- What time will the party finish?
- How will guests get home?
- Will some guests stay over?
- Adult supervision - how will this be done and by whom?
- How will gatecrashers be handled?

If you have concerns about your teenager's drinking habits, ring the Alcohol Advisory Council and ask for the leaflet *Alcohol & Your Kids* or phone the Alcohol Helpline on 0800 787 797.

## **Peer pressure**

All teenagers need friends. Peers are an important part of teenagers' lives. They can shape attitudes and behaviour, can get teenagers into (and out of) trouble.

Parents need to see that peer pressure is not necessarily a negative influence. Parents who are involved in their teenagers' activities have a greater chance of seeing the influence of peers being positive.

It doesn't mean you have to go with them everywhere they go, or choose their friends, but if you take time to show an interest in what your teenager is doing, where they are doing it and with whom, you stand a better chance of curbing any activities that can get them in trouble.

If your teenager is getting into trouble and you think they're in with "the wrong crowd", consider involving the teenager in activities or with other teenagers that can have a positive influence. Find out about local sports and leisure activities, cultural groups and youth clubs, where their contribution will be valued. Look for your teenager's strengths - sport, art, music etc - and encourage them into activities and with people that will boost their self esteem.

Recognise also that negative peer pressure might just as likely be negative situation pressure. Your teenager and friends might well act very differently at the beach with a car full of alcohol than they would at home. Consider changing the situation. Rather than trying to stop such activity outright, it might be better to have your teenager having a drink at home with friends where it can be controlled and supervised (see previous section on alcohol).

Listen to other adults who are involved in your teenager's activities. Don't ignore teachers, sports administrators, youth workers etc who talk to you about your teenager. Take seriously any discussions about bullying, drug-taking or other negative activity by your teenager - and talk about ways of doing something about it.

## Youth suicide

Most teenagers lead happy - if sometimes complicated - lives and go on to make further valuable contributions to their family, community and society.

However, in a country that takes pride in the achievements of its young people, the saddest statistic must be the number of youth suicides. More than 150 young New Zealanders take their life each year, one of the highest rates among Western countries.

Why these people commit suicide is open to wide debate. Is it the result of economic reform or simply bad parenting? Even the parents of young suicide victims are often at a loss to understand. Many victims appear to be leading normal, healthy lives - typical teenagers. Then suddenly, they are tragically gone.

The causes, according to a study of suicide, the Canterbury Suicide Project, can be many. The main ones are:

- Childhood difficulties, such as family conflict or sexual abuse.
- Drug use disorders.
- Anti-social behaviour.
- The triggering of the suicide attempt by some life crisis such as the breakup of a relationship or trouble with the law.
- Psychiatric problems, such as depression.
- Parental problems.

Any one, or several of these, can bring about a suicide attempt.

As parents, we have the challenge of making sure it doesn't happen to our children.

Probably the best thing we can do is do our best - right from the start. Following some of the advice in this and other parenting booklets, learning about parenting and children, listening and talking to our children, and valuing their contribution to our families, is all going to help.

Teenagers especially are finding their way in the world; trying to work out how they fit in. If we do our best to let them know they are valued, there may be less likelihood of them undervaluing themselves.

We cannot live our lives as parents constantly worrying about whether our children will commit suicide. The statistics are grim, but the reality is that youth suicide is still rare. However, we must always be alert to the danger signs. They might be verbal, behavioural or situational.

### **Verbal**

It has been suggested that up to 90 percent of people who consider suicide tell someone about it. That means we have advance warning - and we can do something about it, as long as we are listening.

Whether you are a parent, friend, teacher or neighbour, if someone discusses the issue of taking their own life, even if they appear to joke about it, take it seriously. If you think they might be considering suicide, ask. A direct question is likely to get a direct answer. If they say "no", but you still suspect something is amiss, seek clues by asking if there has been a recent significant event that might have depressed them. If they do admit to thinking about suicide, ask when. If they have a specific time in mind, you will know how quickly you need to act. Ask how they intend to take their life, and whether they have the means of doing it (ie a gun). Do they have a plan? The more organised the person is, the more likely they are to be serious.

### **Behavioural**

A young person considering suicide might take an unusual interest in "dark" themes - drawing pictures involving death, listening to music with death themes or taking an interest in people who have taken their own life.

They might suddenly begin to put their affairs in order by giving away treasured possessions, showing sudden improvement from a bout of depression, or apologising for things they have done to people.

They might begin to mutilate themselves in a minor way.

### **Situational**

The loss of a friend or close relative - whether by suicide or other means - can sometimes heighten suicidal thoughts and actions. If the previously mentioned signals are also evident or have been in the past, be particularly alert at this time.

If you see the signs, talk to the person. Let them unload their problems by talking to you about them.

About 80 percent of suicides are prevented by non-professionals - ordinary people.

If they have immediate plans to commit suicide, ring the Police. Otherwise, organise for them to talk to someone who is qualified to help - try Youthline, Samaritans or one of the other agencies listed at the back of this booklet.

# Keeping our Children Safe

Good parenting is not just about creating a caring family life for your children. It is also about ensuring that your children are in a safe physical environment, where your family and possessions are secure. Apart from family violence, violence in the home is most likely to occur when a burglar is disturbed. It is unlikely to be their primary intention, but burglars can become violent to avoid being caught. It is, therefore, important that your home is secure from burglars.

Burglaries occur in New Zealand at the rate of about one every six minutes. They can occur at any time of the day or night, but most likely (in about 75 per cent of cases) during the day, when there is less chance of people being at home.

The Police say the three most important steps you can take to maximise home security are:

- Fit reliable locks to all doors and windows.
- Put security markings on all property.
- Join your local community support group (contact your local Police community constable).

## Preventing break-ins

Check each part of your home for security risks.

### Front door

Make sure your front door has a double deadlock so it allows locking from both inside and outside. This prevents burglars breaking door glass and reaching inside to unlock, or opening the door from inside to take out large items that would not fit through windows. A five-lever mortice lock (that is a lock set into a hole cut in the door) is recommended. Also, fit bolts to the top and bottom of the door, add a security chain and insert a door viewer for extra safety.

### Other doors

If necessary, replace two-lever mortice locks on back and side doors with five-lever locks or a double-cylinder deadbolt, and add bolts to the top and bottom of the door. Fit hinge bolts to outward-opening doors such as in conservatories to prevent doors from being forced open. Fit patio bolts to the top and bottom of the doors. Sliding doors can be protected with anti-lift deadlocks.

### Windows

Most burglars gain access through windows, and most of those entries are through windows at the back of the house. Locked windows are a serious deterrent for burglars. Consult a Master Locksmith to find out what kind of locks and window openers are available for your particular home (it will depend on whether you have wooden or metal windows, how they open and where they are located). Give priority to windows at ground level. If you have upstairs windows, put locks on all those that can be accessed up a drainpipe or from a flat roof. Glue the glass slats of louvre windows in place or install security bars.

### Skylights

If a burglar can reach it, fit an appropriate lock.

### Garage

Fit a deadlock or padlock and locking bar to the door and fit a lock to any door that provides direct access to the house.

### Shed

Don't provide burglars with the use of your tools. Make sure your shed has a padlock and strong hasp on the door and locks on all windows.

### Get Alarmed

An installed alarm system is often enough on its own to deter intruders. Alarms are more expensive than locks, but when added to locks, they are very effective deterrents.

## General safety

Work out a home security routine for when you leave the house, go on holiday and go to bed at night. Make a checklist if necessary, so you secure all doors and windows, switch on any alarm and outdoor lights.

Don't let anyone in your home that you do not know or trust. See who is at the door through a door viewer or secure window before opening. Ask for identification if necessary, and ask for a telephone number you can ring to verify their identity before allowing them entry.

Don't leave keys in the letterbox, under the mat or "hidden" somewhere outside, and don't leave a note on your door - it's a sure sign you are not in.

Engrave all your valuable possessions, preferably with a personal number such as your driver's licence.

Take a note of the serial numbers on all your appliances and electronic equipment. Photograph valuable items, particularly antiques or paintings, so they can be identified if found. Make sure your house address is clearly visible so Police and other emergency services can find you quickly. Permanent reflective attachments on footpaths are ideal. Install external lighting under the eaves of your house. Don't forget the dark areas at the side or rear of the house. Keep shrubs and trees trimmed so intruders have nowhere to hide. Display warning signs indicating you have tight security, and indicating that you are a member of a Neighbourhood Watch or other community support group (contact your local community constable for details).

## **Fire safety**

It is often children who are the tragic victims of house fires. Fire can engulf a house in flames very quickly, so it's important you have smoke alarms for early warning and a fire escape plan so everyone can get out of the house quickly.

Children should never have unsupervised access to matches, lighters, candles or other naked flames.

They don't realise the danger of fire or how quickly a fire can spread.

The small cost of smoke alarms is nothing compared with the knowledge that you will be alerted early to a fire that could kill you and your children. Smoke alarms can give you vital time to escape safely.

Two alarms per house is recommended, and one on each level of multi-storey homes. Make sure one is in the hallway near sleeping areas.

Other precautions you can take include:

- Connect a hose that can reach all areas of the house to an outdoor tap and keep it connected.
- Buy a fire extinguisher (consult the Fire Service for the correct type for your situation), but remember extinguishers have limited uses. It could be fatal if you use valuable time with a fire extinguisher when you should be concentrating on saving life and calling the Fire Service on 111.

An escape plan is essential if you are to reduce the likelihood of someone losing their life or being injured in a fire. The Fire Service's EDITH plan - Exit Drills In The Home - is a valuable exercise in which the whole family should be involved, and have some fun at the same time.

Sit down with your family and discuss your plan, taking into account the number of people in the house, where exits are, how everyone will get out, where you will all meet and what you will do then.

Your escape plan should include:

- Two ways out from each room - there is an obvious way out (the door), but ensure you discuss the alternative way out.
- Means of helping young children, elderly people or those with disabilities. Your plan should have a designated helper for these people.
- Somewhere to meet safely outside (such as the letterbox).
- How to call the Fire Service on 111 from a safe telephone (if you have a cellular phone, leave it where you can find it quickly).

When you have decided what you are going to do in an emergency, practise it regularly so the drill becomes automatic. Make sure babysitters also know your drill.

If a fire does happen, consider life first. If a smoke alarm or some other alert sounds, GET OUT FAST by one of your planned escape routes. Delays to gather valuables can be fatal. Smoke and deadly gases rise, so keep low to the ground and crawl if you need to. Close doors behind you as you leave the house if you can.

Don't use a lift if you are in a multi-storey building. Take the stairs, where special smoke-stop doors will help stop the spread of fire into stairwells.

Once you get out of the house, ring the Fire Service on 111 as soon as possible from a neighbour's house. Then stay out of the burning house - it is dangerous to re-enter a burning building. Leave the fire for the Fire Service to deal with.

If you are in a situation where your clothes catch fire, use the STOP, DROP and ROLL rule - STOP immediately (don't run as that will fan the flames), DROP to the ground or floor and ROLL over and over until the flames are out.

## **Traffic safety**

If we want our children to be safe on the roads, we must first set an example by acting responsibly ourselves; and second, take responsibility for our children's safety.

We can only expect our children to learn that speeding and other dangerous driving habits are acceptable if that is how we drive. If we want our children to wear seat belts or cycle helmets, we must

wear them.

Our teenagers are likely to reflect our driving and safety habits as they come to the point where they want to get their driving licence. Consider letting them learn with a reputable driving school. Talk to them particularly about the dangers of speed and drink/driving, and the fact that a licence means they must act responsibly not only for their own safety, but also for that of their friends and other road users. Roads are dangerous places for children - every day a child pedestrian is hospitalised, and every 18 days one is killed. As soon as a child is old enough to move about, they have the potential to be involved in a road accident. That is why it is crucial that parents keep toddlers away from the roads by keeping doors and gates closed or the child under close supervision.

When you go out in the car, put children in a child restraint or seat belt (depending on their age and size). It is an offence to drive with unrestrained people in a vehicle. Remember that you can take only as many people in a vehicle as there are numbers of seat belts. So don't be tempted to take the extra child by sitting them between others who have belts, or by placing two children to a belt.

When they are old enough for school, go with them over the route they will be taking. If they are to walk to school, walk with them a few days beforehand and look for the safest route, keeping an eye out for danger spots, particularly where they have to cross the road. Get them to use pedestrian crossings and talk about where cars might come from - perhaps around a corner or from a driveway.

If they are to take a bus, show them where they will get off the bus and where they should then go.

The road outside a school is always busy when the school day begins and ends. A Police/Land Transport Safety Authority leaflet called Chaos at the School Gate - Are you Part of the Problem? suggests:

- Always set a good example with your children when crossing the road - it will help to ensure their safety when you aren't there.
- Walk to the school gate to drop off or collect your child - always hold on to little hands.
- Never call out from across the road - excited children forget to look out for traffic.
- Have children use the car door on the footpath side - it keeps them away from the traffic.
- Never stop on the yellow "No Stopping" lines - they are there to ensure children can see and be seen.
- Take extreme care when pulling into driveways close to the school - child pedestrians can be unpredictable and unaware of your presence.
- On wet days, drive slowly and with patience. Obey all school parking restrictions - be prepared to walk further than usual.
- Above all, choose safety over convenience.

## **Babysitting and home alone**

As a parent you are responsible for your child's safety and well-being. You often need a break from those responsibilities, however, so you ensure your children are left with someone you can trust. Right? Unfortunately, not all parents appear to take such precautions. Cases where parents have left their children without any proper care is all too frequent.

Under the law, parents and caregivers are responsible for supervising or arranging suitable supervision for children at all times up to the age of 14.

Section 10B of the Summary Offences Act 1981 states:

"Leaving child without reasonable supervision and care - Every person is liable to a fine not exceeding \$1000 who, being a parent or guardian or a person for the time being having the care of a child under the age of 14 years, leaves that child, without making reasonable provision for the supervision and care of the child, for a time that is unreasonable or under conditions that are unreasonable having regard to all the circumstances."

It does not mean literally that you must not leave a child aged under 14 alone. It might not be "unreasonable" to leave a child who is, say, aged 13, mature and trustworthy, and where a neighbour is advised that you are out, and in a case where you will not be gone for long.

The Police take seriously cases where children are left for long periods of time - having to cook meals, look after small children and generally fend for themselves.

If you need to leave your children for any time, make sure they are being looked after or looked out for by someone capable and trustworthy. Children are vulnerable and trusting - don't leave them with just anyone. If you have doubts about a neighbour or even a family member, don't use those people as babysitters.

When you need to call in a babysitter you don't know, find out something about them first. Invite them over when you are there for the first occasion, so you can introduce the children and get details without

having to rush out the door.

Make sure they know where they can contact you and what to do in an emergency. Keep emergency numbers near the telephone and show the babysitter where your emergency and civil defence supplies are kept. If any of the children are on special medication, ensure the babysitter knows how to administer it if necessary.

Show them exit doorways and tell them about the family evacuation plan in the event of a fire or other emergency. Practising the exit drill (see separate section on fire safety) can be a fun activity for the babysitter and the children.

Make sure the house is secure when you leave, checking all doors and windows. Tell the babysitter not to open the door to strangers. The babysitter should tell telephone callers that you are not available, not that you are out and that they are alone with the children.

Be sure the babysitter gets home safely - don't let them walk home on their own in the dark.

# Child Abuse

"The desperate face of a two-year-old boy peering from his bedroom window set off bells of alarm that led to the rescue of a toddler surrounded by filth and isolated from the outside world, an Auckland court was told today. The West Auckland boy was found covered in faeces and imprisoned in his room so his mother, who worked as a stripper, could hit the town at night. Neighbours said the boy was violent, spoke in grunts and went through their rubbish like a dog. A neighbour, seeing the boy's face at his window in October, dialled 111 for help. Yesterday, the 23-year-old mother, who has name suppression, sobbed in Henderson District Court when she was convicted by Judge Coral Shaw of wilful neglect...." **NZ Press Association report, December 12, 1997.**

Abuse and neglect of children in the family is a serious, ongoing problem in New Zealand. Reported cases such as the one above are greeted with revulsion by most parents, but they still occur with uncomfortable regularity.

The latest statistics show that more than 6000 children are abused every year, with the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service saying child abuse or neglect occurs at a rate of 17 cases a day. Such statistics are not anything New Zealanders can be proud of.

Except in cases of sexual abuse, women are just as likely as men to abuse children.

Abuse is not usually random, but occurring on a regular basis that gets worse over time. It is not defined as just physical attacks or sexual abuse - it can include emotional or psychological acts that are designed to exert power and control over children. Abuse can be:

- Physical - Sometimes it does not cause bleeding or leave bruises, but it is enough to cause fear of physical harm in a child. When violence is used, a child fears that next time it will be worse.
- Sexual - Rape or the use of force or coercion to induce a child to engage in sexual acts against their will.
- Emotional - It can be constant put-downs and name-calling, intimidation and harassment; things that make children feel bad about themselves. It is likely to include yelling and threats of physical violence, or threats designed to make children fearful. Looks, actions and expressions might be used to instil fear. Items valuable to a child might be smashed or pets harmed.
- Isolation - A child might be isolated from friends, often because their friends are made to feel unwelcome in the home.
- Neglect - depriving children of necessities such as food, shelter, supervision appropriate to their age and essential physical and medical care.

Child abuse occurs in all types of New Zealand homes - it is as likely to occur in a wealthy city suburb as a poor country town and is common in all families, religions, races and cultures. In most cases of abuse, the abuser is well known to the victim - a family member, close relative or friend of the family. While actual violence against children is a big concern, children are also harmed by the violence they might witness in the home. A Women's Refuge study suggested that, for women receiving help from refuges, 90 percent of their children had witnessed violence and 50 percent of the children had also been physically abused. Twelve percent had been sexually abused.

It is of concern that children not only see the violence, but also hear the shouting and crying that go with it.

## Effects on children

As victims and witnesses of family violence, children can be severely harmed.

Children can suffer horrific injuries as the result of violence in the home. Adults, because of their usually dominant physical strength, can hurt children more than they ever mean to.

If their mother is subjected to violence, most children know. They often witness the traumatic beatings or the humiliation. Sometimes they get involved, trying to help by attempting stopping the violence themselves. They can get hurt by accident or as part of the attack on another victim.

Studies have shown children suffer long-term effects of witnessing abuse through:

Increased illness Low self-esteem Social problems Failure at school Violent delinquency

A United States study found that children who grew up in violent homes were twice as likely to commit violent crimes as those who lived in non-violent homes.

Children who witness family violence have been shown to be more aggressive and anti-social, more fearful, and to have low social skills.

And 88.2 percent of children in women's refuges who had witnessed the abuse of their mother showed behavioural problems such as hyperactivity, anxiety or aggression that were severe enough to be regarded as clinical problems.

The greatest long-term danger is perhaps that children accept that violence is acceptable behaviour - that when an adult is angry or frustrated, violence is an solution.

Girls who see their mother abused can model their mother's behaviour, becoming fearful, withdrawn and distrustful. Girls who have been in abusive families are more likely to accept victimisation and violence from their friends and partners in adulthood.

Boys might model their behaviour on that of their violent father. Boys can become aggressive, bullying not only their friends and siblings as youngsters, but also their mother. As adults, they are more likely to beat their partners and commit violent crimes.

## How it happens

Child abuse is about power and control - a desire by an abuser to dominate a child through fear.

Why do adults want to do that? Often it is simply that they know of no alternatives to physical discipline, or that they want to cover their own inadequacies by trying to dominate children who are in no position to defend themselves. Many parents grew up with abuse in their own family and are simply continuing the cycle.

Part of the reason it has become such a problem is that society has accepted that abuse in a family is where it stays - many people accept that "it's nothing to do with us".

Of course there are triggers to abuse, such as alcohol and drugs, stress, unemployment and so on. But it will not stop until everyone sees abuse as socially unacceptable, wherever it occurs.

Police and welfare agency initiatives in dealing with child abuse have begun to change the attitudes of society.

An abuser is no longer able to continue violent behaviour without the risk of neighbours, family and friends reporting it. And when it is reported, it is dealt with by the Police, the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service and a justice system that recognise it is a crime.

Society is now also expecting abusers to take responsibility for their actions and to take the consequences; to get help, to do something about their behaviour.

## The danger signs

Even children can be quite clever at hiding the signs of abuse or neglect. However, some of the following signs might indicate something is amiss, though they should be interpreted with care - they could be signs of other conditions:

For children, general signs of physical abuse can include upset such as:

- Moodiness, irritability, excessive crying.
- Loss of appetite - changes in eating habits.
- Changes in behaviour at school, or towards other people, regularly missing school.
- Personality changes.
- Dirty appearance, inadequately dressed for the climate.
- Withdrawing into themselves.
- Being afraid to go home, running away.
- Undernourished and not taken to the doctor when ill.
- Inability to concentrate.
- Having unexplained fears - of the dark, of being alone, of specific people (even relatives and friends), of places (bedrooms and toilets).
- Sleep disturbances - nightmares, fear of going to bed or sleeping alone.
- Unsupervised for long periods.

It can also be indicated by physical signs: bruises, burns, fractures, scalds or grazes. The injuries might be accidental, but if a child seems to be hurt often, the injuries are getting more serious, or there's something odd about them, it could be abuse.

Emotional abuse is more difficult to identify, but children might: Tend to believe they are bad and worthless. Have problems getting on with others, or be hard to live with. "Shut off", or become too good. Have difficulty controlling anger. In cases of sexual abuse, children might:

- Complain of pain or irritation in the genital area, or get infections and urinary problems.
- Start doing something they've grown out of - such as crying, wetting or soiling their pants, or clinging.
- Have inappropriate sexual play.
- Give a coded message, or they might say directly they are being abused.

## **What you can do to help**

In a crisis, dial 111 and ask for the Police. If your children are in immediate danger from another family member, a visitor or intruder, look for safety first. Run outside or head for a public place, scream for help or call the Police. Emergency calls are free from all telephones, including payphones and cellular phones.

If you are a neighbour or other witness to violence or other abuse, you have a responsibility to report it. It is a crime and the Police will react accordingly. They ensure firstly the safety of the children.

If you suspect your own children or those of a family member or a close friend are being abused, find out what you can about the family's present situation. Talk to the parents and listen for any clues to whether they feel they have particularly difficult problems. See how they react to their children and how their children react - is there a lot of yelling and threats, do the children look fearful?

Can you encourage the parents to seek help? If they agree to get help, follow it up.

If you are not sure what to do, talk to a help agency in your area (look in the front of the phone book, or ring one of the numbers listed at the end of this booklet). They have trained staff who can advise you what to do or make discreet inquiries about the victim's welfare.

If you genuinely believe children are being harmed, call the Police or Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service immediately. Children need special help because they are often unable to take action to keep themselves safe.

A Police officer or social worker can then take appropriate action to protect the child.

If you merely suspect abuse is occurring - you might have heard yelling and slapping from next door, a child crying - should you report it?

If you are not sure, contact a help agency. You can talk confidentially with them about what you know. They will probably have a better idea whether abuse is occurring and will know what can be done to help.

People, especially those not close to a victim, might be reluctant to report violence or abuse because they feel it is none of their business or they might be wrong.

However, children have a right to be protected from harm - you might be their only hope of changing their circumstances.

# Helping Create Safer Communities

Many government and non-government departments and agencies are working hard to enhance the lives of young people and to keep them safe. Several have focused efforts in recent years on developing greater parenting skills among the country's caregivers. Education of parents is seen as a key element in making the future brighter for everyone.

The Ministry of Education's Early Childhood Development Unit, for example, has introduced a Parents as First Teachers scheme that recognises the crucial role parents have in developing children's lives.

Welfare agencies such as Barnardos not only manage childcare centres and offer home help, but also run parenting courses.

The emphasis has moved away from just providing the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff - it is seen as better to encourage positive childhoods than pick up the pieces of those shattered by abuse or neglect.

## The Police

The Police will always respond to emergencies where a child's life or immediate well-being is in danger. However, they also recognise that they can build safer communities by helping parents create a safe and positive home life for their children.

The Police have many programmes that encourage young people to take a responsible role in society, and to contribute positively to the community in which they live.

One of these programmes is the Law Related Education Programme. Specially trained Police officers, in partnership with teachers, social workers and community workers, help educate children about such topics as crime prevention, traffic safety, community policing and victim support.

Two of the biggest programmes under the Law Related Education umbrella are Keeping Ourselves Safe, a very successful programme for children about the dangers of sexual abuse, and DARE, which looks at drug and alcohol issues.

The Police have also been involved in programmes such as: The Role of the Police; Safe Walking; Safe Cycling; Safely Home; Minder (babysitting); Fingerprinting; Emergency Situations (dial 111); Keeping Law and Order; Lost; Search and Rescue; Stealing; Vandalism; Kia Ka Ha (bullying).

## The Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service

The Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service sees as its vision "all families meeting their care, control and support responsibilities".

The service works with other groups for the protection, well-being and best management of children in safe families.

CYPFS aims to include family/whanau in the decision making process for children and young people. It provides care and protection for children and young people when they are believed to be "at risk" because they are experiencing (or are likely to experience) such things as physical or sexual abuse, violence and conflict between their caregivers, emotional or physical neglect, or mistreatment from caregivers

The service also provides youth justice, which is a special section of the law that deals with offending by children aged 10-13 years and young people aged 14-16 years.

Children and young people who break the law are treated differently from adults who offend. The law makes sure they are accountable and encouraged to accept responsibility for their offending, but also aims to help young offenders learn from their mistakes and develop in a socially acceptable way.

The Adoption Service is a branch of CYPFS that provides advice on adoption both within New Zealand and from other countries.

## Community Councils

The Crime Prevention Unit of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet has in place a long-term strategy that focuses on crime prevention and community safety. It is a strategy that involves not only the Government and its agencies, but also communities and individual members of those communities.

The strategy aims to co-ordinate efforts to develop solutions to the problems of offending and anti-social behaviour. As a result, more than 50 Safer Community Councils have been established throughout New Zealand.

The councils have been entrusted with putting in place social crime prevention strategies, which

include several areas designed to protect and enhance the safety and well-being of children.

Seven key areas identified are:

- Supporting "at risk" families.
- Reducing family violence.
- Targeting youth "at risk" of offending.
- Minimising the formal involvement of casual offenders within the criminal justice system (diversion).
- Developing an approach for the management of programmes that address the misuse and abuse of both alcohol and drugs.
- Addressing the incidence of white collar crime.
- Addressing the concerns of victims and potential victims.

## **The Hillary Commission**

The Hillary Commission aims to improve the lifestyle of all New Zealanders by promoting and developing sport, fitness and leisure activities. The commission was established to not only encourage top-level sporting achievements, but also to get ordinary people involved in sport and leisure activities. It recognises that participation in regular activities builds healthy, confident people, local pride and strong, cohesive communities, and a strong sense of national identity and pride.

It puts an emphasis on junior sport, saying that the kids who have a go, feel part of the action and play sport designed specially for them, will grow up with great memories. Those who are left on the bench, forced to play with much bigger kids or stuck at home because no one would coach their team will probably be the first to drop out.

A big proportion of the commission's funds (from the Lotteries Grants Board with a topup from the Government), goes to community activities, where everyone is encouraged to participate, regardless of their age, fitness or physical ability.

# Who Can Help?

In an emergency, the Police will ensure the immediate safety of children. If a child is considered to be at risk, attending Police will liaise directly with the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service, who will decide what action to take.

If you are a woman who is in an abusive relationship, you can contact the Women's Refuge. You do not have to leave home and go to a refuge to receive support for yourself and your children, though it might be appropriate in serious cases. Information and practical assistance is available from the workers on the end of the telephone.

If you are not coping and you feel you can not look after your children as well as you should, talk to someone, anyone, and ask for help. It can be a friend, relative, neighbour - preferably someone you trust.

Call one of the numbers listed here and discuss your problems with someone who will listen.

If you need help with the children, consider getting someone in from an organisation such as Barnardos, which offers home help for a small fee. The investment might be well worth it for the relief it can bring.

Don't let your situation get to the point where you will hit or otherwise abuse your children - it is not their fault.

Contact list

Many local personal help services are listed in the front of your telephone book. Others are listed under Community Services or Welfare Organisations in the Yellow Pages. Several agencies have national freephone telephone numbers so parents can receive free advice.

## **IN EMERGENCIES, FOR POLICE, FIRE OR AMBULANCE - DIAL 111**

Alcohol Helpline - for advice and information about alcohol - 0800 787-797

Barnardos - offering advice and support services for families - 0800 222-345

Citizens Advice Bureau - where you will be put in touch with the appropriate agency to help you - 0800 FOR CAB (0800 367-222)

Plunketline - to support parents of young children - 0800 101-067

Relationship Services - helping people build positive relationships in families - 0800 RELATE (0800 735-283)

Youthline - a listening ear specially for young people - 0800 376-633

## **Acknowledgements**

*Earle Cooper*, Police Managers Guild

Crime Prevention Unit, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service

Office of the Commissioner for Children

Barnardos Wellington Area Office

Alcohol Advisory Council

New Zealand Fire Service

The Hillary Commission

The Montessori Association of New Zealand

*Dick Dalton*, Police National Headquarters

*Owen Sanders*, Police National Headquarters

*Phil Watson*, Friends for Life

*Judy McCormack*, The Counselling Group

*Hilary Hawes*, Cholmondeley Children's Home, Governors Bay, Lyttelton