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## **Child Abuse and Neglect: Critical Information We Don't Want to Know**

“To take such a complex creature, one who was meant for God and is destroyed by sin, and attempt to understand how the development of that creature can be affected by hideous trauma is to attempt the impossible.”

*Diane Langberg*

Think of the children in your lives. If all is well, they are amazing, beautiful, inspirational, and full of hope, energy, and life. We have all heard it before: our children are our future. It is absolutely true, and something we must take very seriously. Far too many children are betrayed and battered, are broken down instead of being given what they need to achieve healthy development and productive, satisfying lives, and have little or no hope of gaining success in their lives. Few people want to hear about child abuse and neglect, and even fewer want to fully acknowledge the true extent of the problem. It is occurring in all of our communities and at all levels of society with unthinkable frequency and severity. Minimizing or turning away from the problem, or claiming that it is someone else's responsibility, is making prevention and intervention inadequate and causing devastation in this nation.

Child abuse and neglect are not just about insult, injury, pain, or deprivation. Those are wounds that heal. Child maltreatment is devastation in relationships when relationships are critical for the child's survival and health, when those relationships set the foundation and build the framework for the child's entire life. For some it is poor quality construction, for others the foundation is cracked or a few support beams are broken, and for too many the structure is completely damaged or destroyed. Think of yourselves as children. Think of living in fear, sometimes fear for your life, day in and day out, when you cannot protect yourself. Think about living in a love/hate/fear relationship with the one who is supposed to love you, care for you, and protect you. Think about your mind, body, and soul being horribly violated at the hands of those you depend on to survive. Abused and neglected children have no stability or safety when they are most helpless and vulnerable. They grow up in an angry, violent world, are taught that they are worthless, are taught to hate themselves, and carry those things with them the rest of their lives.

Child abuse and neglect, together referred to as child maltreatment, is probably the most common form of interpersonal trauma and very likely the number one health crisis in this nation, even though we would rather not think about it or really recognize the true extent of the problem. The number of reported and confirmed cases of child maltreatment range from one million to three million per year, depending on how abuse and neglect are defined. Many cases go unreported since maltreated children are often too afraid to

Speak up and do not show scars, or those that should report do not. In an extensive, longitudinal, national adolescent health survey, one-third of the adolescents who responded had experiences that met the survey's criteria for physical or sexual abuse or neglect. Psychological abuse alone is most often not considered by researchers because it is so hard to define and even harder to confirm, but it is probably much more common and harmful than we think. There are maltreated children sitting in every classroom of our schools. Three to five children die at the hands of their caretakers every day in this nation, mostly infants and toddlers. In 2013 about 1520 children and adolescents died as a result of maltreatment. These are the confirmed cases – many experts believe there are actually significantly more abuse-caused deaths that are instead attributed to something else such as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome or accidents.

The effects of child maltreatment are devastating and very often lifelong – mental and physical illness, learning and behavior disorders, underachievement and discipline problems, delinquency, premature sexuality and teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, adult lifestyle and relationship problems, employment problems, suicide, violence, criminality, and so on. In fact, one of the more common causes of parents abusing their children is having been abused as children themselves – it is all too often a generational cycle since many survivors do not receive appropriate treatment and that is all they know. Most people incarcerated for murder are there because of violent, tragic behavior that resulted from the effects of severe child abuse. Appropriate treatment could lead many of them to normal lives, but very few will have the chance. In 2008 the estimated cost of child maltreatment to this nation was \$123 billion. We now know from newer research that it is actually much more due to the tremendous health care costs these survivors incur throughout their lives. Survivors are often seen as different, inadequate, unworthy, and problem or “bad” children and adults because of mental illness, learning, behavior, lifestyle, or legal problems caused by the abuse, resulting in social rejection, disadvantage in school, employment, and healthcare, and inadequate provision of treatment or services in the schools and communities.

Some things are being done, and so much more needs to be done. Creating awareness is an important first step, since public awareness can create the energy and drive for action. Being willing to notify child protective services or the police if you suspect a child is being abused or neglected; helping the survivors in your community feel accepted and supported, find help, and gain a voice in advocating for their own needs; promoting and supporting efforts to research, develop, and implement prevention and intervention programs; and setting the expectation in your schools, public offices, social service agencies, healthcare agencies, and community service programs that these children and adult survivors are to be appropriately identified, supported, and served are critical things that all people can do to make a difference.

Two online information resources:

Child Welfare Information Gateway  
[childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov)

National Children's Alliance  
[nationalchildrensalliance.org](http://nationalchildrensalliance.org)