Protecting Our Youth: The State of Child Welfare in the Caribbean—Where We Have Come, Where We Are Going, and Where We Have Been

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CASE STUDY

Clive seems to literally be “carrying the world on his shoulders”. His handsome little face seemed to be pondering why an adult actually wants to talk with him. He resides with his sister, brother-in-law and their two children.

He appeared to be a very smart child and has some faded marks on his hands and legs, clear indications of beatings he had suffered over a period of time. He was unkempt at the time of our discussion. At seven years old Clive still wears pampers. His teacher indicated that he has problems retaining his fasces, which she speculated could be a result of abuse.

When asked questions about sharing any bad thing that he has ever experienced he readily responds “my big sister does beat me nearly every day. Day before yesterday I get licks on my belly and me foot. She does beat me with shoes, slippers, belt, whip anything. A time she pelt me with a big brick and burst me head then she put antibiotic on it. I does got to wash my clothes, clean de concrete, fetch water and sweep de yard.” “Everybody does beat me even me lil nephew, he is two. My mother does beat too when she come. She burst me mouth already, and a time she black and blue me face. Me brother-in-law does beat me for everything. He does beat me with rope, wire and big wood. I ent like no body in my house; only my lil niece, she is five she don’t beat me, she does play with me and she does cry when anybody knock me”.

(Patterson and Bess 2008, 81-82)
Child Physical Abuse

- Prevalence and Consequences
- Discipline versus Abuse
- Child Abuse Laws and Policies
- Prevention and Intervention
Child Physical Abuse Prevalence

- 40 million children are abused each year
- 25-50% of all children have been victims of child physical abuse
- Annually 31,000 children die due to child maltreatment

(World Health Organization (WHO) 2010)
Child Physical Abuse Prevalence

- Problem of child maltreatment is “endemic” in Caribbean regions (UN Secretary General’s Study on Violence Against Children in the Caribbean Region 2006)
  - Barbados reported 304 incidents of physical abuse over a one year period (April 1998-March 1999)
  - St. Lucia recorded 45 cases of physical abuse for the first half of 2007
  - The Island of Dominica has seen a steady increase in child abuse reports (14% increase from 1997 to 1998)
  - St. Vincent and Grenadines identified 261 cases of physical abuse from 1995-1999
  - Jamaica had a large number of child hospitalizations due to abuse and neglect in 2004
  - Trinidad and Tobago reported 71 cases of physical abuse over a eight month period in 2005 (Kirton 2011)
Child Physical Abuse Consequences

- **Physical**
  - Broken bones, hypertension, chronic fatigue, obesity, shaken baby syndrome, impaired brain development

- **Psychological**
  - Depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders

- **Behavioral Problems**
  - Aggression, juvenile delinquency, and adult criminality

- **Social and Other Problems**
  - Peer and social relationships problems
  - Cognitive impairments
  - Promiscuous behaviors
  - Alcohol and substance abuse

Child Physical Abuse Consequences

- **Direct Costs**
  - medical services and hospitalizations
  - psychological services
  - child welfare system
  - police interventions

- **Indirect Costs**
  - special education services
  - juvenile and adult criminal behaviors
  - lost productivity to society
Child Physical Abuse Definition

- **Child physical abuse**
  - behaviors that intentionally inflict harm onto a child
  - fail to protect a child from foreseeable danger
  - actions that result in marked injury, disfigurement, death, or that effect a child’s physical development and well being

(Kirton 2011)
Child Physical Abuse Perpetrators

- Perpetrators of Child Physical Abuse
  - parents, especially mothers or other females living in the household
  - history of childhood abuse
  - low levels of education and income
  - high stress levels
  - mental health problems
  - alcohol or other drug abuse
  - marital problems
  - few social supports
  - lack of parenting skills

(Kirton 2011, Patterson and Bess 2008)
Child Physical Abuse Perpetrators

- **Kirton (2011) describes some Caribbean abusive parents as...**

  overly involved with their child. Often deprived of good parenting themselves they tend to be greatly upset by behaviours that most parents accept as normal...This abuse may begin when a parent who is already anxious, depressed or hostile tries to control a child’s behaviour but loses self control and ends up beating the child in the presence of others without the modicum of guilt or remorse. They would become aggressive and rebuke anyone who tries to intervene with remarks that the child is theirs and they can discipline the child as they want to without interference from anyone (39).
Child Physical Abuse and Discipline

- Most incidents of child physical abuse occur in the context of discipline
  - A study on Guyanese children who were mistreated found that “the majority of physical abuse perpetuated against children in homes actually occurred as a result of beatings or other physical punishments administered as discipline, especially by their mothers” (Patterson and Bess, 2008, 27).
Child Physical Abuse and Discipline

- **Discipline**
  - training to act in accordance with rules

- **Corporal Punishment**
  - physical punishment, as spanking, inflicted on a child by an adult in authority
33% of Guyana children reported being physically harmed by family members (2004)
93% of Haitian women believed that it was normal to hit and slap children (2000)
48% of parents used physical abuse to discipline their children, and more than half of the children in Trinidad and Tobago (51%) and Jamaica (73%) reported receiving physical punishments
76.5% of Barbadians approved of lashings with a belt on the buttocks, approximately 14% endorsed hand slapping, and 13.3% approved the use of a rod or cane when spanking a child

(Larrain and Bascunan 2009)
Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states:

State parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical of mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parents (s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment described heretofore and as appropriate for judicial involvement.
Child Abuse Laws

- Children’s Law (2003) in the Cayman Islands
  - later Amended in 2008 as The Children Bill

- The Children’s Authority Act 2000 of Trinidad and Tobago

- The Child Care and Protection Act 2004 of Jamaica
Caribbean cultures have been known to be influenced by a ‘culture of silence’

- Cayman society is reported to be a closed and closely-knit society, in which families do not interfere in the internal affairs of other families. As a result, severe problems that may be affecting children rarely get acted upon” (Thompson 2006, 27).
- The Cayman Islands has adopted mandating reporting laws, requiring health professionals, teachers, police, ministers, child care providers, and other public servants that work with children to report any suspected incidence of child maltreatment, or face penalties such as a $2000 fine or up to six months in jail.
- Belize, Jamaica, Guyana, Grenada, Dominica, St. Vincent, Grenadines and St. Kitts and Nevis have all also taken proactive steps toward mandatory reporting statues.
A number of studies in Cayman, including the Report on Causes of Breakdown in Caymanian Society and the Risks and Vulnerabilities Facing Children in the Cayman Islands, identifies poor parenting as a ‘major risk factor.’

“The problem of poor parenting is believed to be the single greatest risk facing children in the Cayman Islands and is reportedly manifested in several ways, including: parenting skills ...and the tendency of others to be physically abusive to children” (Thompson 2006).
Strategies aimed at enhancing parenting skills
- Caymanian National Parenting Program
Increasing public awareness of the problem
Home visitations
Family resource centers
Respite and Crisis care programs.

(Child Welfare Informate Gateway 2008)
Conclusion

- Child physical abuse is a global concern that has been recognized as an increasing problem in Caribbean communities.

- Child physical abuse carries adverse consequences for both child victims and Caribbean societies.

- While many factors can contribute to parents being at risk of physically abusing their children, governmental laws, policies, and services (focused on the human rights of the child) and parent education can help prevent future child victimization.
References