

Understanding abuse

[Society](#), [Child Abuse](#)



Recent periods of social progress and development have seen many concepts and constructs receive widespread attention to what can be described as negative behaviours and one concept and area in particular to receive this attention is abuse.

Any response to find a solution to a problem whilst remaining effective and appropriate can experience various complications as there can be an inability to provide a clear and detailed definition of what it actually constitutes, provision of evidence that remains compelling and substantial and taking on board the cultural, social and political considerations and factors that are relevant to the society pertinent to the discussion will receive complications.

This lack of clearness in its debate has led to the development of additional descriptions alongside abuse such as psychological maltreatment (Garbino, Guttman&Seeley, 1986), further confusing the issue and its resolution but in spite of this confusion there has been much learned from what attempts have been made in the exploration and analysis of abuse and this discussion will try to identify different types of abuse, explain why particular groups or individuals may be vulnerable, its differing contexts, risk factors associated and ensure the impact of cultural and social factors on the range of abuse is analysed thoroughly. Abuse is the weapon of the vulgar” (Samuel Griswold Goodrich) Abuse is a term that relates itself to any deliberate calculated damaging or detrimental behaviour purposefully used to damage or harm an individual or group and can occur when a person misuses or mistreats another group or individual without any interest in their worth, dignity or well-being.

It can be seen as a behaviour where the abuser is interested in the exertion of power and control over the individual and be prepared to manipulate or exploit the individual involved into submission or obedience to their will. In recent decades it has been described in various forms but the main categories to contemplate are Physical, Emotional, Sexual and neglectful and a recently highlighted phenomena of Institutional abuse, that has led to greater awareness and debate.

Physical abuse was the earliest form of abuse thought to have come under public consideration in the 1960's and was believed to be linked to child abuse until child sexual cases started to come to prominence with the Cleveland cases in 1987 (Corby, B, Child abuse, 1993, p86) and has been defined as " hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning, suffocating or otherwise causing physical harm to a child. Physical harm may also be caused when a parent or carer feigns the symptoms of or deliberately causes the ill-health to a child they are looking after.

This situation is commonly described using terms such as fictitious illness by proxy or " Munchausen Syndrome by proxy" (Dept of Health, 1995: 5). This definition can be seen to as quite specific but does not provide any suggestions as to when such actions are deemed grave to authorise intervention and prevention of such behaviours and although it has various forms it can be the most visible, having damaging and long lasting effects.

Emotional abuse and neglect has been defined according to the Dept of Health as " the persistent adverse effects on the child's emotional development" (Dept of Health, 1999: 5-6) and relates itself to malicious "

parental behaviour that damages a child's self-esteem, degrades a sense of achievement, diminishes a sense of belonging and stands in the way of healthy, vigorous and happy development. Emotional abuse has been described as an overtly rejecting behaviour of carers on the one hand or as passive neglect on the other"(Iwaniec, D, Child care in Practice, 1994).

As a separate form of abuse it was only recognised by legislation in the United Kingdom in the 1980's although it did receive recognition in the United States since 1977. Attempts have been made to define emotional abuse and neglect in a general way and five damaging behaviours have been levelled by Garbino, Guttman and Seeley(1986) as rejecting, isolating, terrorising, ignoring and corrupting with these actions being a concerted attack by an adult on a child's development of self and social competence only being described as overtly abusive, painful and developmentally and cognitively damaging.

Such behaviour can be seen as an act of commission or omission occurring " when meaningful adults are unable to provide necessary nurturance, stimulation, encouragement and protection to the child at various stages of development which inhibits his optimal functioning"(Whiting, 1976). Sexual abuse in relation to children has been described as " involving, forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities whether or not the child is aware of what is happening.

The activities may involve physical contact, including penetrative(e. g rape or buggery) and non-penetrative acts. They may also include non-contact activities such as involving children in looking at or in the production of

pornographic material, or watching sexual activities or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways”(Dept of Health, 1996, 6).

This description of sexual abuse specifies that sexual abuse may not necessarily involve physical contact although there can be many other areas to be included when involving a definition such as what is the relation of the perpetrator of such acts and the definition put forward by Glasser and Frosh seems to be more comprehensive “ Any child below the age of consent may be deemed to have been sexually abused when a sexually mature person has by design or by neglect of their usual societal or specific responsibilities in relation to the child, engaged or permitted the engagement of that child in any activity of a sexual nature which is intended to lead to the sexual gratification of the sexually mature person”(Glasser and Frosh, 1988, 5). This definition pertains to whether or not it involves genital or physical contact and whether or not there is a discernable harmful outcome in the short term. Child sexual abuse is a highly difficult problem and is far more commonplace than previously thought and also affects older as well as younger children(MacFarlane&Waterman, 1986) although there is a greater degree of seriousness among practitioners about the urgency of intervention to protect children from such abuse.

Another form of abuse that has received prominence in recent years is Institutional abuse that mainly involved children living in residential care including being under the care of a local authority with one case that rose to prominence being the Pindown Inquiry in 1991 concerning the use of a system referred to as Pindown in children’s homes in Staffordshire England.

The Inquiry outlined how methods of controlling children involved techniques that could be construed as sensory deprivation and solitary confinement, were used over a large period of time under the approval of the management of Staffordshire Social Services being only described as brutal in there approach.

In the following years a glut of cases came to the fore and the Department of Health responded by instigating a general inquiry in the state of residential care that came to be known as the Utting report 1991, that provided a view on the conflicting sides in care homes good and bad and making a note of the need for greater vigilance and the development of greater measures to protect the safety of children in such places of care. In situations where abuse occurs different groups and individuals can be more vulnerable to abuse than others and the need for greater research into these cases will only help to develop a better understanding of abuse and its forms..

One grouping where abuse has gained significance and shown how a group can be more vulnerable is amongst elderly individuals in domiciliary and residential settings as “ behind closed doors” can be more difficult to combat as contact between victims and services can be extremely limited. Elder abuse has probably been placed in the background in its significance to such abuse as child abuse but any form of abuse is not to be tolerated as each individual has a significant sense of worth and uniqueness in life though elder abuse is often an ignored and hidden problem in society as “ The voice of older people is rarely heard by those who have responsibility for

commissioning, regulating and inspecting services”(Fitzgerald, G, Action for Elder Abuse).

In 2000 the Dept issued guidance(No Secrets) on the protection of vulnerable adults from abuse defining a vulnerable person as one “ who is or may be in need of community care services by reason of mental or other disability, age or illness and who is or may be unable to protect him or herself against significant harm or exploitation”(No Secrets, paras2. 5-2. 6) and although this definition was not restricted to older people it has received criticism as it appeared to exclude those individuals who do not require community care but with no standard definition of Elder abuse in the United kingdom as the term has been imported from the United States one commonly used definition is “ a single or repeated act of inappropriate action occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person”(House of Commons Health Committee, Elder Abuse, Volume 1, 2004, P5).

Abuse exists when a lack of care from one person towards another is present in a relationship and the thought of predicting abuse or neglect is appealing because of its ability to be preventative and adults have a sense or obligation of care in many respects of life being held to be trustworthy in the application of that duty but the more responsible the relationship the higher the chance of abuse that can exist and parental care is one context that can be seen as the primary type of relationship where abuse can occur and what does or does not be held to be adequate care can be important when making decisions about the likelihood of abuse occurring. With the Childrens Act

1989 not giving any firm statement of intent on what can be deemed adequate care and broad ideas on what care should involve such as physical and emotional responses, health, protection and cognitive behavioural development, research and evidence can be crucial in reviewing contexts and the suggestion that particular children can be determined for abuse with researchers interested in the dynamics of why particular children are susceptible.

Predicting abuse by observing maternal responses to new born babies is an important feature of child protection with children who are seen as not wanted or the “wrong sex” by their parents at a greater risk (Roberts, 1980) but many parents often carry into life unresolved issues from their own childhood or present circumstances that have a substantial impact on their ability to form deep and lasting relationships with their children,” The undermining effect of a difficult child on parental functioning will be lessened when the parent has an abundance of personal psychological resources, conversely an easy to rear child can compensate for limited personal resources on the part of the parent on maintaining parental effectiveness” (Belsky & Vondra, 1989, 188), therefore solid connections to parent or primary care giver is essential to the child’s development and growth.

Parents who experience substance abuse, domestic violence or mental health issues can provide risk factors or damaging environments where children can be open to abuse and although not all parents with these experiences can be a risk to their children, their ability to provide adequate care can be limited

and damaging. Substance misuse can result in a parents ability to perform basic parenting tasks(Kroll, 2004) and be generative of chaotic environments and has come to focus in many families that are under child protection enquiries even during pregnancy and early development. Mental illness can also be seen as another factor relating to abuse ranging from a parents depression to psychotic or delusional violence that can result in fatal cases. The risks can be seen as greater if the parent shows hostility or aggression towards the child, ultimately becoming a target with many children taking on a caring role themselves as parenting can be in conflict and opposition. Another factor co-existing and overlapping with the factors previously discussed is domestic violence.

Domestic violence is common and is seen usually in the context of the male exerting power over a female and a form of controlling behaviour with violence beginning even during pregnancy increasing in severity leading to a effect on emotional and psychosocial development. With a child being witness to such behaviour anxiety and stress can result in the child's having long term effect even when physical violence is not present. So although factors can emphasise a disposition to abuse the truth is never that clear and no single event or outcome can be determined and the likelihood is that factors such as those discussed are part of a complex context and set of circumstances beginning even long before the child is involved.

Social factors can also have considerable effect on abuse and links have been made between male unemployment and the physical abuse of children(Gillham, 1998) and the Department of Health has also conducted its

own studies finding that 95 percent of children on protection registers are from poor families (Dept of Health, 1995) with children from lower economic environments more likely to be abused (Lawson, 2000), nevertheless it has been argued that child abuse cuts across all social class with lower classes more susceptible to come under government investigation because of their need for more government resources with this in mind “ Child abuse is strongly related to class, inequality and poverty both in terms of prevalence and severity... solving the problem requires a realignment of social policy which recognises the necessity of tackling the social, economic and cultural conditions associated with the abuse” (Parton, 1985, 175-176) “ Abuse in the form of violence against women is a normal feature of patriarchal relations.

It is a major vehicle that men use in controlling women, as such it is the norm not an aberration. The widespread incidence of child sexual abuse reveals the extent to which men are prepared to wield sexual violence as a major weapon in asserting their authority over women” (Dominelli, 1986, p12) Abuse can be seen as a product of a particular culture and child rearing practices are different from time to place being influenced by religion, class, sexuality etc.

Culturally approved practices “ such as isolating infants and small children in rooms or beds of their own at night, making them wait for readily available food or allowing them to cry without immediate attending to their needs or desires would be at odds with the child rearing philosophies of most of the cultures discussed” (Korbin, 1981, p4) need to be taken into consideration when defining are certain acts abusive but that does not mean

that these ideas are not to be challenged. In the vast majority of abuse cases children or women can be seen to the victim and women have been subjected to horrendous acts and ordeals through out many cultures. The challenging of old ideas as an example can be seen in the context of the rape of women in Zimbabwe being traditionally remedied by the arrangement of the perpetrator to the victim in marriage. This act can be seen as seriously and psychologically wicked in its practice but it is an example of where outside support for change can be directed.

Other cultural practices such as circumcision and clitoridectomy should be seen as widely abusive acts (Finkelhor&Korbin, 1988) and as all abuse is seen in the context of power over the victim rape is another practice especially in the context of war, with the idea of dehumanising the victims leaving a state of fear, anger and hate having long term effects individually and collectively. Being able to differentiate between culturally normative and abusive behaviour without the fear of being seen as racist or stereotypical in approach can result in the protection of abusive individuals and many cases have seen elements of the failure to protect, such examples have included Tyra Henry (Lambeth, 1987), Ailee Labonte (Newham Area child protection committee, 2002) and Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003), so culture can be a significant factor in how abuse operates and is defined. “ No one ever became depraved with suddenness” (Juvenal, AD c-60-c130)

To conclude, further study and research needs to be paid into abuse, its characteristics and manifestations and greater clarification needs to be sought in many areas and inquiry within the context of abuse, peer

relationships and the way they are experienced and handled having implications in how individuals relate to others in life as “ Contemporaries increasingly seek one another as the primary sources of support, security and intimacy”(Mueller&Silverman, 1989, p583) so many factors need to be taken into account when in discussion but as stated earlier abuse is seen as the act of power over another individual or group so the last words belong to the great Carl Jung in that “ Where love reigns , there is no will to power and where power is all pervading, Love is absent. The one is but the shadow of the other” (Carl Gustav Jung , 1917, Gesammelte Werke, Vol. 7, Zurich, Rascheter-Verlag)