

Child Abuse Cases Up In Santa Cruz County

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Even in the coldest weather, Johnny may come to school in bare feet and torn clothing.

Withdrawn and self-deprecating, he appears to have more than the usual number of childhood bruises and frequently remains in the schoolyard rather than going home after his classes.

Although he probably wouldn't tell anyone of his problem, Johnny carries all the symptoms of the abused or neglected child.

Woefully, he is one of the growing number of local children who are being abused or neglected by their parents.

In the first six months of this year, 307 new cases of child abuse were reported to the county's child protective services.

The figure is more than double the number of cases that were reported in 1970, according to Mary Bronson, a member of the protective services.

Most of the cases were listed as neglect, but many were a result of physical and sexual abuse or other abusive actions.

Still, that statistic is only the tip of the iceberg, according to Bronson. Many instances of child abuse are never reported.

Abuse — whether it is the headline-grabbing cruelties of some angry parent or the simple frustration of a parent with his child — is a matter of concern for many local groups.

A number of special programs have sprung up in the county to deal with the problem of child abuse and a special task force of the county children's commission has been formed to study the problem.

According to a number of representatives from various child-parent programs, child abuse has no class lines or social barriers.

In fact, approximately

one-half of reported child abuse cases are in families who are not at the poverty level, according to Bronson.

Bronson pointed out that, if anything, there has been an increase in the number of non-welfare child abuse cases that are reported to her office. Rather than simply the standard of poverty, there are other causes for the child-abuse syndrome, say experts.

One reason may be that parents have learned habits of child abuse from their parents.

With no formal courses offered in being a parent, a child only has the experiences of his parents as guides to parenthood, according to Bill Winnings, a foster parent and founder of Joychild — a parental education program.

"Unless there is outside training, you tend to perpetuate the traits of your parents," said Winnings. Typically, an abused child becomes a child abuser himself. Representatives of the county's child abuse task force recommended special high school classes to help the upcoming parent learn the realities of being a parent.

Much of the time, abuse is triggered by stress, according to Bronson.

"Parents who neglect their children are usually parents who are under stress at one time or another," she said.

It takes only the loss of a job, unexpected bills or marital problems to set off a round of child abuse or neglect, according to Ronna Seabrook, head of the local parental stress organization. Other precipitating factors may be that the child is unwanted in the first place, or simply that the adults are not cut out to be parents, added Winnings.

"Often immature parents may expect gratification from their children that are unrealistic," said Bronson.

The romantic world where children laugh and play happily may not fit into the reality of child-rearing which includes diaper changing, colds and anger, added Carol Branchich of the county nursing services.

"This is where education comes into play," said Winnings. "There is a need to break down stereotypes and make a realistic portrayal of what it is like to be a parent."

He said that he has already put together a slide show on what it is like to be a parent and expects to take it to local schools this fall.

Other local agencies are joining in the fight against child abuse.

The child abuse task force has recently published a pamphlet on the problem with listings of agencies which provide help — both for the parent and the child.

The list includes counseling centers, county social services and health agencies, day care centers and parental classes.

The booklet also pinpoints who to call when an instance of child abuse occurs.

Although many people are reluctant to interfere in the "sacred ground" of child-rearing, there is a duty to report any suspected instances of abuse or neglect, say experts.

In case of potential child abuse, parents are encouraged to call the Parental Stress organization.

The service offers counseling to parents and a way to help handle some of the problems of child-rearing. When there is strong suspicion of child abuse, the county child protective services or health services should be contacted.

They will respond to the report and investigate the alleged case of child abuse.

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**WHERE TO GO FOR
HELP**

When you have immediate