MENTAL HEALTH THERMOMETER

Child Abuse as part of Domestic violence: “My home is not safe; what will happen to me?”

Can child abuse be part of domestic violence? Is it possible for child abuse to happen without a parent or guardian being consciously aware that they are abusing a child? Moreover, what are some of the factors likely to trigger increase of child abuse during the COVID-19 season?

First, let us discuss, what is the difference between children discipline and abuse?

Every parent or guardian desire to see their child grow up to be a disciplined adult. Discipline has been described as the training that makes one to be willing to obey rules/guidelines or be in control of situations, even tough situations. Coming from the Latin word ‘Disciplina’, discipline means management, rule, education, practice, teaching and trained condition. Whether for children or adults, discipline is a core virtue in development and growth at every stage of life.

On the other hand, child abuse involves physical, emotional, neglect, exploitation, and sexual abuse, amongst other forms of violence. Whereas physical marks or scars are left in physical abuse, emotional and sexual abuse sometimes go unnoticed yet with debilitating short and long terms effects. Emotional abuse involves name-calling, verbal insults, yelling, withholding love, support, or guidance, amongst others.

The nature of pandemics, like COVID-19, heighten tension because of the acute stress triggered by uncertainty, fear, and anxiety. Admittedly, COVID-19 has triggered fear and uncertainty also amongst children, resulting to stress. Indefinite closures of school, which cuts off their connection with teachers and other children, becomes an additional stressor. Social amenities they are used to for outdoor play has also been altered. Visits to their cousins, relatives, friends, and grandparents has also been limited. Just like adults, home confinement has sparked tension within themselves. Even small children can sense tension in their immediate environment.

Amid stress, children behavior is likely to change, and can easily be interpreted as ‘indiscipline’. Think of a child who starts wetting the bed all over again. Or a child who will become so clingy, yet the parent/guardian is caught up with work. Other symptoms of stress amongst children may include, sleeping or eating problems or display a lot of fear and refuse to sleep alone. For the older ones, while some may withdraw, others can become aggressive, or have low concentration/lack of focus and some maybe unable to perform tasks previously handled.

For parents and guardians, who are also likely to be dealing with their own anxiety, such conduct can easily be viewed as ‘indiscipline’, making children at a greater risk of abuse and neglect during this period. Stressed parents have the potential to respond to their children’s anxious behaviors or demands in aggressive or abusive ways.

REFLECTION: As a parent/guardian, ask- “Do I find myself shouting at my kids more during this period? Am I always threatening them? Has conflict at home gone a notch higher? Am I taking time to listen and validate my children worries, fears and concerns? Am I dealing with my own anxiety, OR am I projecting them to children?
What are some of the sign/symptoms of Stress in children?

- Excessive crying or irritation
- Returning to behaviors they have outgrown (e.g. bedwetting)
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Fear of dying or losing a loved one (for a little bit older children)
- Avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past
- Poor concentration
- Becoming clingy or overly dependent
- Withdrawal tendencies
- Aggressiveness/Violent
- Poor concentration

What are the best ways to support children during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

- Create time and be deliberate about spending time as a family
- Listen to children and validate their emotions
- Assure them through action and words that you are available for them
- Engage in fun activities together
- Keep a regular routine so that they experience some level of stability
- Limit family’s exposure to news coverage (including social media) because children are likely to misinterpret information and become fearful
- Take time to listen to each of them and talk about their concerns (depending on the age)
- Depending on the age, talk about the COVID-19 pandemic in a way they can understand; remember peers or other people may misinform children, so take time to share accurate information.

Remember...

- **Validation means**- letting the children know that you understand their emotions like frustration, anger, sadness etc. For example, when a child expresses their frustration; you can say something like “I understand it is disappointing that you cannot spend time with your friends.” After acknowledging their feelings, go ahead and discuss how to cope with the situation.
- There is nothing necessarily wrong with feeling angry, disappointed, fearful, sad, and anxious; the important thing is to talk about it and to become a support system.
- As a parent/guardian, your self-care is important because it helps you to be a better support system for your children and others around you.
- When you are so overwhelmed experiencing a lot of tension, confusion, anger, sadness, etc.; you can easily ‘abuse’ those around you like children.

Your mental well-being is an ASSET - for more support for yourself or your child just dial 0793-484-333 or 0728-961-939.