

Victims Resource Center helps

Child abuse is certainly not passing phase

By JOHN HOINSKI
Staff Writer

If anyone believes the problem of child abuse in Wyoming Valley is a passing phase that will eventually wear itself out, here are some alarming facts to keep in mind:

— A recent study claims that one out of every five girls and one out of every 11 boys will be sexually misused by the time she or he reaches 18.

— 50 per cent of all children misused will never tell anyone.

— The average age of the sexually misused child is 8 years old.

— An estimated one in 20 Americans are victims of incest.

— A survey by the American Humane Association shows a 200 per cent increase in reports in sexual abuse in 1976.

Although these figures deal on a national level, they also apply to some degree here in Luzerne County. In the valley alone, the Victims Resource Center reported a four per cent increase in Child Sexual Abuse last year, dealing with 485 clients during fiscal year 1984-85, including 59 per cent of whom were under 18 years of age.

Fortunately, the VRC is doing an excellent job in helping young people identify and cope with these experiences and has been awarded on a national level for its efforts. The center's programs were recognized by the Economic Development Council and given the Pocono Northeast Community Award, and are distributed state-wide as a model for programming throughout Pennsylvania.

Under the VRC's "Child Safety Program" children are being taught to say 'no' in what they feel are threatening situations, along with helping them develop support lines outside the family, such as a

teacher, friend or school nurse. Perhaps more importantly, they are being told to tell.

"We started with these programs because a majority of our clients are children," Carol Lavery, Executive Director of the Victims Resource Center, said. "A few years ago the only available literature were the 'Stranger Danger' types, telling children to stay away from people they didn't know. But the truth is that in 75 per cent of the cases, the child knows who the abuser is.

"We're trying to get the children to say, 'hey, even though I'm a child I have a right to say 'no.' When a child is abused the person will tell them not to tell anyone. We're saying to them, 'tell, it's important.'"

The center, which is funded by the United Way, presented over 200 programs to school children throughout the Valley last year and has over 300 scheduled for this year. These programs are conducted by specially trained speakers, for free, to any children's groups, small communities or churches.

"We've been teaching mostly in a classroom setting," Lavery explained. "Children are more comfortable in a class. We found that the lectures are not very effective in a situation where there are 90 to 100 people. But aside from the presentations themselves, we like to get them reinforced by the teachers and parents.

"Usually, we deal with the PTA and let them know exactly what we are doing and how we can get the best results. And we've been getting a lot of positive feedback," Lavery continued.

"But you know, it's interesting when you talk to some of the parents, sometimes they will remember an experience that they went through as a child. You might remember how all the kids in the neighborhood used to stay away from a certain man because he was bad. So the problem has always been there."

But now there are places like the Victims Resource Center to help deal with it.

Investigation continues

No new information has been obtained in the alleged child abuse incident at the Kiddie Center Day Care Center on the campus of College Misericordia, authorities reported.

On January 6, officials of the college were informed by the Luzerne County District Attorney's office that they were investigating the possibility of a child sexual abuse case involving one of the workers of that center. As of now, interviews are still being conducted and no further developments have occurred.

The probe stems as a result of complaints by the parents of a child who attended the center. They alleged that some form child abuse had taken place there although no specific details have yet been released.

As a result of these allegations and the increasing number of child abuse cases that have been reported in the Wyoming Valley, The Dallas Post will conduct a series of articles in this issue alone, discussing various aspects of the problem as well as an actual case story.

These articles do not relate in any way to the investigations at the Kiddie City Center and are in no way to be construed as a verdict against the center itself.

There may be no cure for abusers

By JOHN HOINSKI
Staff Writer

There was a time when Luzerne County officials did not pay much attention to child abuse problems. Not because they didn't care, but because it was a rarity. It just didn't happen here. That was something that always happened in "other towns."

But, the truth is the Wyoming Valley is no different than anywhere else, and sexual child abuse is no longer being put on the back-burner, but at the forefront of priorities to be dealt with.

"I remember years ago a gentleman by the name of Ken Wooden was giving a lecture," former District Attorney Robert J. Gillespie said. "He had written books like, 'Weeping in Playtime,' and now I believe he is working nationally for 20-20. But when we started talking about child abuse, he asked me how many reported cases we had. I said, 'Ken this is just a small town, we get maybe two or three a year.' He said, 'you're being grossly under-reported.'"

"Then after the Jodziewicz case, we were getting more reports on child abuse. We started working with the Children and Youth Services and we began receiving 40 to 60 calls a month," Gillespie continued. "But out of those 40 to 60, maybe five were prosecutable. But even then it was sometimes difficult to prove. How do you prosecute someone when the child is only three or four months old? Obviously, the child can't testify so sometimes it can be very frustrating."

Because of the number of cases being reported and the exposure being devoted to them, it seems the abuse problem in the county is rampant. But authorities say that may not necessarily be true.

"After talking with experts in this field I don't think the number is rising," Gillespie said. "But because of the media attention that is given, it may seem that way."

Joe Loftus, Director of the Luzerne County Children and Youth Services, also agrees that it is a

major concern but, he, too, isn't sure of the actual number of incidents.

"There seems to be an increase in child sex abuse cases, but I can't say for sure," Loftus stated. "I don't know the exact numbers. Maybe it just seems that way because of the media coverage and concern and because there is so much public awareness."

"Now we are going into the schools and lecturing on child abuse and making people more aware of the problems. And the public in general is also more conscious."

The District Attorney's office, under the guidance of Gillespie, also became more involved and established a child abuse unit, the first-ever in county history.

"When we first started the program, I appointed Gary Sworen to the unit," Gillespie explained. "Then Bruce Anders, who was also a member of the district attorney's staff, joined him and eventually we hired another person by the name of Melissa Church. Hiring her also gave us another dimension because children are better able to relate to her than to males. Children are uncomfortable with a male, so having her aboard is a big help."

But, even with a successful prosecution, there is another area of concern that is equally as frustrating as the abuse itself — life after jail. Unfortunately, confinement is not the answer. It only suspends the sickness of the individual for a time, but it does not cure it.

"We have got to realize that for every abused child there is a perpetrator who is responsible," Loftus said. "We just can't give them a jail sentence and put them on probation. Putting them in jail won't stop their behavior. We have to get treatment for them."

Gillespie agrees that incarceration is not enough, but right now there is no other alternative.

"Unfortunately no one has been able to prove pedophiles can be helped," Gillespie said.

Although the problem can turn into a vicious cycle, at least the first steps have been taken to correct it.

Abuse!

Former child abuser tells her story

By JOHN HOINSKI
Staff Writer

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The following story is true as told by an actual child-abuser. The name, however, has been changed in order to protect the identity of the actual person involved.)

Jane is a 32-year old housewife and the mother of two children. She is intelligent, warm and loving. And she is a former child abuser.

For the past year, Jane, with the help of Parents Anonymous, has refrained from taking her frustrations out on her children, and now, in fact, is involved with the PA self-help program as a guest lecturer and counselor for individuals who have experienced similar problems. But for three and a half years, she was a raging fury who never hesitated to vent her anger towards her children.

"The whole problem started to develop right after the birth of my son," Jane explained. "After the novelty of being a mother wore off, I became depressed for about three or four months. I didn't care about myself. I didn't care about my son. I wouldn't even change his diapers, that's how bad it got. My sister-in-law or my mother would take care of him and see to his needs."

"Eventually we moved here from New York, which was about five years ago, and things got worse. We didn't have much money and my husband was only bringing home \$130 a week. We couldn't go anywhere because we didn't have

enough money and I didn't know anyone around here. It became very lonely, so I began taking my frustrations out on my children. That's when I really started beating them. I just didn't care about them," she continued.

"I remember one day my daughter was standing on the edge of the steps and my mother said, 'she's gonna fall.' I said, 'let her.' I didn't care. I just wanted them out of my sight, out of my hair and I didn't care what happened to them."

Six months after moving to the Valley, Jane suffered a nervous breakdown. Along the road to recovery, she spent six months in a Council House while her children were being looked after at a Day Care Center. But even after her return, the problems resurfaced.

"The same things were starting to happen again," Jane said. "One day I sent my son to the store and he came back with the wrong change or something like that. Anyway I started to hit him. I mean I really belted him. He was black and blue and had bruises on his body."

"Then I did the same thing with my daughter. I actually flung her across two rooms and she was only two years old at the time."

Jane said she never struck the children with objects and that they never suffered any broken bones or had to be hospitalized as a result of her actions. But the rage did have its effects. She described them as "stunned" and that they "didn't know what to expect."

Her husband was aware of her tirades against the youths but, did nothing more than tell her to "leave them alone."

"He would tell me that I was jealous of the kids," she said. "And he was right. He paid a lot of attention to them. There were times when he would take them out on a

weekend and I'd be left at home alone.

"Then he and I started having problems and I had no one to turn to at all. The kids were always afraid of me. They would tell me I was bad and that they didn't like me."

Finally, an incident involving her daughter made Jane realize that she did have a child abuse problem.

"My daughter was sitting on the floor playing with her doll one day when all of a sudden she started hitting it and punching it and screaming at it. I said, 'what are you doing?' And she said, 'well that's what you always do to me. She was being a bad girl so I beat her.'"

"When she said that I thought, 'My God what am I doing to my kids?' I knew if I kept it up I wouldn't have them much longer."

The child's rebellion against the doll was ironic, however, because it may help explain Jane's behavior toward her children. She was an abused child herself and statistics show that child abusers are often abused themselves as children, although Jane cannot say for sure if that is the case with her.

"If you ask me now if I was abused as a child I'd say, yes. But back then I never really thought about it," she said.

"When I was growing up, we had a huge family and we all lived in one house. Aunts, uncles, all kinds of relatives and I can remember having a bolo bat paddle being broken over me more than once."

"My mother ruled with an iron fist. Everything had to be in its proper place. In fact we used to call her the Army sergeant. I remember one day she went to slap me in the face and she caught my eyelid with her fingernail and she made a big slash over it. There was blood

gushing out and she felt really bad about it. But even today when she comes in to visit I say, 'oh no the gestapo's coming,' and I make sure everything is in its place."

Life is back to normal now for Jane and her family. There has not been an incident in a little over a year, although the emotional scars still remain.

"It still hurts when I look back on it," she said. "But now things are different. My kids aren't afraid to come up to me with a problem. If they fail a test at school for example, I'll tell them to try and do better and then I tell them to tell their father."

"They don't have that fear any more. Take last night for instance. I wasn't in a very good mood and my son kept tickling me in the ribs. I said, 'You're gonna cry,' and he kept on tickling me. I started laughing and he kept doing it. But that's how things have been. We're doing a lot more as a family."

Still, the threat of abuse re-occurrence does exist on both the emotional and physical level, only now there are other outlets of expression.

"If you feel that rage building up you can always call a counselor or a help line that operates 24 hours a day," Jane stated.

Looking back on the ordeal, she is not proud of what she has done, but she is proud of her accomplishments with Parents Anonymous and the fact that she is now helping others.

"There are people who don't know where to turn to with problems like this. We're trying to spread the word that there are self-help centers and places like Parents Anonymous. There is help out there for people who want and need it."

And it's help that can prevent another child from being abused.

S.A. Smith named to directors

Shirley Ann Smith, RN, M.S.N., Clinical Specialist in Oncology and Coordinator of the Hospice Program at the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center, has been elected to a three year term on the Board of Directors of the Pennsylvania Hospice network (PHN). The PHN, made up of Hospice programs and promotes the Hospice concept for terminally-ill persons through legislative, ethical and educational procedures.

Mrs. Smith is a graduate of USC-Los Angeles County Medical Center School of Nursing in California, Bloomsburg University and the University of Pennsylvania. She has published papers on Hospice care and is involved in Hospice evaluation studies.

She and her husband, Clair, reside in Dallas.

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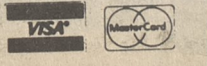
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