Child Trends Debunks Common Myths about Child Maltreatment

Myth 1: We can predict which children will be maltreated based in risk factors.

Risk factors associated with child maltreatment include extreme poverty, family unemployment, caregiver substance abuse, lack of understanding of child development, and neighborhood violence. However, each of these only weakly predicts the likelihood of maltreatment. For example, although maltreatment is more common among families living in poverty than among other families, the majority of parents with low incomes to not maltreat their children. When risk factors are present, protective factors can mitigate the likelihood of maltreatment. Such protective factors include parental social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need, and children's social-emotional competence. Because maltreatment is so difficult to predict, prevention approaches that strengthen protective factors among at-risk families broadly--even if the risk is low--are likely to be most effective in reducing maltreatment.

Myth 2: In families with abusive parents, parents and children don't love each other.

It is a common misconception that abusive family members do not love one another. Maltreatment affects all children differently. Maltreatment survivors frequently hbor negative feelings toward abusive parent(s) through adulthood; yet, at the same time, many victims of maltreatment show ongoing loyalty to their parents, remember positive qualities about their parents, and continue to love them. Many parents may love their children, yet not be equipped to deal with the stresses that come with raising children. When a parent perceives their environment to be unpredictable and stressful, and does not take advantage of available social supports, they are more likely to respond to children in an aggressive manner.

Myth 3: We know how many children are maltreated.

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) reports that, in 2013, citizens and professionals made 3.5 million reports alleging maltreatment to public child welfare agencies. Agencies carried out 3.2 million investigations, and verified 679,000 victims of maltreatment. These numbers almost certainly underestimate the actual incidence of maltreatment. A study that did not rely on official reporting found that actual maltreatment rates may be more than three times higher than the ACF numbers. Studies conducted outside of the child protective services system estimate that one in four children in the United States experience maltreatment in their lifetime.

Myth 4: Maltreated children are better off removed from their homes.

The majority of children who come to the attention of child protective services remain with their families, with the support of in-home or community services. The importance of the parent-child relationship to children's development is a key rationale for intervening to support families, so children can either remain with their families or, if placed in foster care, reunify with their families quickly. In-home services include parent training or coaching, individual/family therapy, referrals to substance abuse treatment, or material supports (food, clothing, furniture, etc.). While foster care is necessary in severe cases of abuse and neglect, children typically have better outcomes in the areas of delinquency, entering the criminal justice system as adults, teen birth rates and earnings if they remain at home.

Myth 5: Only bad parents get so angry with their children that they feel like hitting them.

It is common for parents to get angry or frustrated with their children's behavior from time to time. But it is the inability to cope with anger-provoking situations that increases the risk for potential abuse, as parents lose control of negative emotions and harm their children. Abusive parents are shown to have more unrealistic expectations of child behaviors, and with a low frustration tolerance, are more annoyed with child behaviors. By using more positive parenting and consistent disciplinary practices, as well as coping strategies to control anger, parents can improve parenting satisfaction and reduce parental stress, thus reducing the risk of maltreatment.

http://www.childtrends.org/5-myths-about-child-maltreatment/