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CONCLUSION

Ending Child Abuse

David L. Chadwick

The authors of this remarkable work speak of ending child abuse not as a platitude but as an attainable goal for our country. For the first time in our history, we are presented with a blueprint for accomplishing the goal of ending child abuse and are given an estimate of the time required. The authors propose transformation of professional education in social, legal and health fields, much more complete reporting of abuse by professionals, hugely improved management of suspected and recognized cases, research-based forensic interviewing, vertical prosecution of all cases of child abuse, better treatment, better punishment, perfected prevention and ongoing training and technical assistance for civil, as well as criminal child protection professionals.

The authors point out the encouraging beginnings that have been made in many of the areas of professional competence that transformed child protection in the twentieth century, and led to the hope of ending abuse. Their proposals for change are very substantial. So much so that

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they will dwarf present efforts, and require a societal commitment greater than the war on cancer and comparable in cost to the exploration of space.

DEVELOPING THE POLITICAL WILL TO END CHILD ABUSE

Initiating efforts of this scope requires strong political will, especially when an honest appraisal of our past efforts does not guarantee success of our future ones. Still, no guarantee of success preceded the effort to go to the moon. It did require a reasonable prospect of success and considerable political courage. With respect to child abuse, there is a reasonable prospect that we can end maltreatment and, as reflected in the foreword to this publication, there are at least some members of Congress courageous enough to advocate for children. Unfortunately, most elected leaders, just like most Americans, do not have the needs of maltreated children on their radar screen.

Why do we not have the political will to end child abuse? How is it that behaviors that are intolerable to most people are widely prevalent in a society? How can we understand the persistent, silent, acceptance of child abuse for millennia?

The silence about child abuse appears to be an absolute social requirement in all cultures. Perhaps the human mind cannot accommodate the moral dissonance between the accepted imperatives of child nurture and the realities of the lives of many children. The dilemma is solved by silence. If no one believes they have the power to stop abuse, we must keep it out of sight and out of mind.

To break this silence, and develop the political will to end child abuse, the authors of this volume suggest, beginning in college, teaching child protection professionals the art and science of advocating for children not only in our nation's courtrooms but in front of county boards, state legislatures, and in the halls on Congress. This advocacy is critically important simply because many of these children cannot advocate for themselves. A lot of the worst maltreatment affects infants and very young children who will *never* be able to speak about it.

Although child victims cannot advocate for themselves, many adult survivors of maltreatment can. If the voices of adult survivors are added to the voices of child advocates, the prospect of meaningful reform increases.

The price we pay for our silent tolerance of child abuse is high. It is probably greatest in the unmeasurable, unfulfilled human achievement

potential of the infants and children affected by neglect. But each form of abuse adds to the likelihood of lifelong physical or mental health problems. Taken together, they impose an enormous burden on the health of millions.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

In the struggle to end child abuse, there are many unanswered questions. How we define child abuse will impact on how we measure our success in reducing maltreatment. We must develop new definitions that describe things that we can actually measure that are correlated with the incidence and prevalence of abuse.

In terms of prevention, we know more about what does not work than what does. As noted in one of the articles in this volume, some of the most widespread prevention efforts, such as teaching children personal safety, have been called into question. Even prevention efforts that have measurable success, such as risk-based prevention programs, may be criticized as stigmatizing.

We also need to understand why many boys evolve into men that want to have sex with children. Interventions that might reduce the likelihood of men growing up with this desire have not been adequately developed. A better understanding of sexual development is needed, and this requires a willingness to speak openly about the subject.

A MEANINGFUL FRAMEWORK

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this volume is that it does not pretend to have the answer to all the questions that can arise when boldly speaking about ending child abuse. Instead, the authors offer numerous reforms that nearly all child advocates can agree with. Equally important, the authors offer a framework in which to address the myriad unanswered questions.

It is good to hear from authors who will write about ending child abuse, and no one can be faulted for being a generation or so off the mark in either direction. It will surely take some time. We may already be moving in the right direction. The present volume contains numerous helpful recommendations. If they all come to pass, we will be on the right path.