

THREATS TO OUR CHILDREN

Within recent months, culminating with the savage and brutal killing of Sean Luke, these events have left us wondering if our children are under attack. So far for the year 2006, nine children have been murdered. Last year children have also been the target of murderers and kidnappers.

A Trinidad Guardian headline of Monday April 10th, 2006 reads "Sex Abuse Rampant – cases at 35 Port of Spain Schools." Parents, Guardians, Grandfathers, Male Teachers have all been accused of sexual abuse.

During this month of April alone, victims of crime have reported being robbed by children not older than the age of sixteen years old. Chaguanas Police Station has confirmed that a gang of boys fourteen (14) to sixteen (16) years old are behind a spate of robberies on bicycles in the Lange Park area. The tormentors/killers of Sean Luke who are now before the Courts are thirteen (13) and sixteen (16) years old respectively.

Therefore in this light, the questions seem appropriate:-

☞ *Are our children under attack?*

☞ *What is causing this disturbing behaviour in our children?*

Although it may not manifest here at our School, we as Educators and Parents need to be aware of what is going on around our children and what we can do to stop this madness before it is too late.

Soon your children will leave the safety of the Primary School to face the "jungle" that is Secondary School. There they will come face to face with these and other challenges to their learning. There is no time like the present to start guiding our children and preparing them to meet these challenges and difficulties. While the majority of these problems are faced at present by children of Secondary School, it is only a matter of time before it filters down to the Primary School System.

Children today face many more perils than their peers of late. A few years ago it was said that a child was raised by a village, now children are not safe even in their own homes. We have often told our children not to open the door to strangers – now strangers are entering via the internet and text messaging on cellular phones. Many diseases which people contracted in old age are now being detected in very young children

- ◆ Obesity
- ◆ Diabetes
- ◆ Heart Disease
- ◆ High Level of Cholesterol

It would seem that our children are truly under attack from all sides. Let us examine these threats to our future in greater detail; bearing in mind that although some topics are considered taboo and does not affect you personally, it is still worth being aware of so your child can be prepared to deal with such matters if they happen to them or children close to them.

(I) CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

For many, this is considered a matter that is not to be spoken about. However, this is not something new. According to Mr. Steve Williams, Manager of the Student Support Services Division, reports of alleged sexual activity in Primary Schools are on the increase. He stated that a lot of this was hidden before but is now being reported more. Mr. William also noted that the North Eastern region had the highest incidence of reported cases of sexual abuse!

At least three children recently were victims of murder after being sexually molested.

* **Akiel Chambers** – found dead in a friend's swimming pool where he had gone to a birthday party. Forensic tests have revealed he was sexually molested. To date no one has been charged for his murder.

- * **Dane Andrews** – a Standard Five pupil on his way home from school was allegedly lured to a nearby pond where his body was later discovered. Forensic tests revealed that he was also sexually molested.
- * **Sean Luke** – we all know the horrific details of this child’s torture. He was allegedly abused in the most brutal way and left to die.

These three (3) children were all Primary School children.

What is considered child sexual abuse?

There is no universal definition of child sexual abuse. However a main characteristic of any abuse is one person, usually an adult, in dominance over the child. In addition to physical contact, such abuse also includes non-contact such as carnal knowledge, conversations and child pornography. Child sexual abuse can also be perpetrated by peers as is being reported in certain Port of Spain primary schools.

Effects of Sexual Abuse –Short Term Effects

- ** Includes a range of psychological and behavioural problems which typically include depression, anxiety, guilt and fear.
- ** Anxiety and fear regarding the opposite sex.

Effects of Sexual Abuse –Long Term Effects

- ** Depression and suicidal thoughts.
- ** Use of unhealthy behaviours such as alcohol and illicit drugs.

Signs of Trouble

- ** Agitated behaviour – frightening dreams, repetitive in which aspects of the abuse are revealed.
- ** Sexual behaviour inappropriate for that age.
- ** ‘Acting out’ being cruel to others and running away.
- ** Withdrawing from friends and family.
- ** Suicide attempts.

If you suspect abuse –

- ** If your child says he/she has been abused, try to remain calm.
- ** Reassure the child that what has happened is not his fault.
- ** Seek medical examination and psychological counseling right away.
- ** Remember that children can recover from abuse, if they have the support of caring, available parents.
- ** Get help for yourself so that you can provide the appropriate support.
- ** Teachers in Trinidad and Tobago, by law are required to report suspected child sexual abuse to the relevant authorities.

Protecting Our Children

- ✿ The typical advice "**Don't Talk to Strangers**" doesn't apply in this case. Most sexual perpetrators are known to their victims.
- ✿ Teach your children basic sexual education. Teach them that no one should touch the "private" parts of their body. A health professional can also help to communicate sex education to children if parents are uncomfortable doing so.
- ✿ Teach your children that sexual advances from adults are wrong and against the law. Give them the confidence to assert themselves against any adult who attempts to abuse them.
- ✿ Teach your children that their bodies are their own. That it is OK to say they do not want a hug or that certain kinds of contact make them uncomfortable.
- ✿ Do not instruct children to give relatives hugs and kisses. Let them express affection on their own terms.
- ✿ Develop strong communication skills with your children. Encourage them to ask questions and talk about their experiences. Explain the importance of reporting abuse to you or another trusted adult.
- ✿ Make an effort to know children's friends and their families.
- ✿ Instruct your child to never get into a car with anyone without your permission.
- ✿ It is important to remember that physical force is often not necessary to engage a child in sexual activity. Children are trusting and dependent and will often do what is asked of them to gain approval and love.

(II) CHILD ABDUCTION / RELATED CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES.

There have been increased incidents of children kidnapped for ransom. Primary School child Vijay Persad has not yet been found since his abduction so long ago. Our children are being lured from their homes and schools through a variety of means.

Personal information can be revealed unknowingly by children on the internet chatting with an unseen person. This person can pretend to be anyone, including a child and could extract vital and confidential information. Children playing with cellular phones using text messaging can unwillingly place themselves in danger by sending texts/photographs to 'so called' friends who are really potential kidnappers.

Children are also at risk traveling to and from school. Children, who walk home, especially alone, are prime targets.

The primary responsibility of risk reduction must fall on parents and other caregivers - teachers, babysitters, and drivers.

- ✿ While expecting children to keep themselves safe is unrealistic, that doesn't mean they shouldn't learn some basic rules against danger.
- ✿ Never give out personal information to strangers on the phone, on the internet or on the street. In short – "***Don't talk to Strangers***".
- ✿ Never allow children to answer the phone and say Mom/Dad isn't at home. Instead they can say "*mom/dad can't come to the phone, can I take a message*".
- ✿ Teach your child that adults do not normally ask kids for directions. If someone stops to ask for directions, tell your child not to go near the car.
- ✿ Caution your child not to play in deserted or lonely areas. There is safety in numbers.
- ✿ Establish strict procedures reporting who will pick up your child from school and be meticulously consistent.

- 📌 Teach your child never to go anywhere with anyone who doesn't know a family code word.
- 📌 Make sure your child does not have his/her name on a visible place such as clothing or belongings. It makes it harder for strangers to be on a first name basis with your child.
- 📌 Explain to your child that if they are home alone, not to open the door for anyone except previously designated people. This includes a sales person or a delivery person.
- 📌 Teach older children to go home before dark.
- 📌 Remind older children to phone home.
- 📌 Know who are your child's friends; where they live and their telephone numbers.
- 📌 Beware of any adult that showers your child with an inordinate amount of attention and/or presents. No one should care more about your child than you.
- 📌 Be aware that a **pedophile** is usually an adult whose sexual preference is confined to youngsters. The classic pedophile preys on children from unhappy homes. He showers the child with affection. By the time sexual activity takes place, the child is often an uncomplaining partner and it goes unreported. Please show your child appropriate affection.
- 📌 Teach your child that if he/she is being followed not to hide behind bushes, but to go where there are people or to a safe house.
- 📌 Teach your child that it is appropriate to "make a scene" if he/she senses danger from an adult. Teach him/her to yell "Help!", or "I don't know you!", not just scream.

(III) PEERS, MEDIA, VIDEO GAMES

Children today are bombarded with information both positive and negative. Shows on television, movies, internet material expose children to all sorts of ideas. To illustrate: on the internet there are pages of child pornography which, when viewed by young children encourages them to "act it" out on unwilling participants in the neighbourhood or school.

One senior police officer attached to the Port of Spain Division states "In areas like Beetham and Laventille, children as young as eleven (11) years of age have access to a gun and know how to use it." These are the kinds of children that mix with our children on a daily basis.

The distraught mother of one (1) of the accused in a recent killing lamented "He is a good kid, watching television, listens to music and likes to play video games on the computer.

What she **DIDN'T** say was:-

- ☞ ***What type of shows he looked at.***
- ☞ ***The type of music listened to.***
- ☞ ***The kinds of games he played on the computer.***

Dr. Harold Mahabir, an International Education Consultant, blames the rise of deviant behaviour in children on parents who fail to supervise and monitor the nature of television viewing and video games which only adds fuel to the deviant mind.

He further likened violence on television to the nicotine in cigarettes. In order to satisfy the already tolerant public, the television stations, cable network, movie producers pump even higher levels of violence to gain greater market share.

Our growing children with impressionable minds are having difficulty discriminating between real life and fantasy. Children live what they learn so that when they see violence as a solution for problems, this is how they would react resulting in a generation of violent minds who are very intolerant and quick tempered. Unfortunately, this is now being manifested in the classroom.

- *Hitting for refusal to lend items;*
- *Usage of obscene language;*
- *Fighting for no apparent reasons (just to beat up someone);*
- *Bullying, name calling, taunting;*

What can we do?

- Talk to your child. Engage in meaningful discussions about topical issues like crime, violence, etc.
- Monitor what your children listen to and view.
- Watch television with children.
- Help children select appropriate rated movies and video games. Look at the 'ratings' on these games/movies.
- See ways to restrict children from viewing excessively violent shows.
- Limit the amount of media exposure in the home. Don't let the television be the babysitter.
- All parents must work to establish guidelines for television, cable or movie viewings.
- Know where and with whom your children are at all times.
- Practice what you preach – create 'what if' scenarios with your children to ensure they understand the subtle messages.
- Know your children's friends and their families.

(IV) DIET AND EXERCISE

Have you noticed lately the amount of overweight children there are? Do you know that more and more children are suffering from lifestyle diseases like Diabetes, High Cholesterol, Heart Disease and Obesity? Well, these are the new trends we have to deal with.

What is causing this trend?

- Too much fast food is linked to high cholesterol and heart disease;
- Children having sugary snacks instead of wholesome meals;
- Refusal to have fruits instead of snacks;
- Soft drinks instead of water or fruit juices;
- Convenience – working parents pressed for time simply do not have the time to prepare well balanced meals and opt for one (1) minute meals or fast food;
- Children virtually live in front of the television or computer and don't move around much. Children do not play outdoor games any more.

What can be done?

- ❖ Insist that your child eats healthy:
 - Include a fruit in lunch kit instead of a snack;
 - Encourage children to drink lots of water or juice. Do not make soft drinks readily available.
- ❖ Plan meals to include food from most food groups.
- ❖ Talk to your child about the importance of healthy eating.
- ❖ Engage your child in outdoor activities like running games, football, cricket, kite flying, gardening etc. to facilitate movement to burn calories. Plan family trips – hiking, nature trails, etc.

- ❖ Limit viewing or usage of television, video games, computer, and telephone (previously discussed).
- ❖ Ensure your child visits the dentist and doctor for regular check ups.

(V) INDISCIPLINE

A disturbing trend which is developing is that children are becoming increasingly indisciplined.

Indiscipline here does not merely refer to fighting, stealing or using obscene language. It has to do with the little things that children are supposed to do and are not doing them.

WHAT is indiscipline?

Freedom misused is indiscipline. We can also say that when freedom and responsibility don't go side by side, indiscipline is created. We have given freedom to our children, but not responsibility. We can also say that they have not accepted the responsibility.

Here's a glimpse of indiscipline amongst children in our homes: Your child does not get up in the morning at the scheduled time. He or she takes a bath leaving the towel in the bathroom or on the bed. His uniform is laid out by parents. His mother has to pack the lunch kit and water bottle because he got up late and he does not have the time to do his own work.

When he comes back from school, he throws his shoes and socks carelessly under the bed or under the cupboard. Lunch is served on the table and he is busy watching television or talking to his friends over the phone. He does not do his homework in time and seeks your help at the eleventh hour to complete it.

He does not accept your advice and has the courage to answer back rudely. If you want to find the cause of such behaviour, please go back to your own childhood. There used to be five to six children in the family. Parents were very strict with them. The mother could single-handedly control all the six children in the family.

This was because there was no freedom of choice in food, clothing etc; there was no exposure to media; children were afraid of their parents; there was no freedom to judge whether parents were wrong or right and children used to take on household responsibilities at a very early age.

However, don't take it to be the appropriate way of bringing up children. It had its own drawbacks like subdued personalities. The advantage was that there was no indiscipline.

In the present scenario, things are entirely different. We have now given our children freedom of speech and choice in matters of clothing and food. There are just two children in the family and you can fulfill their needs easily. Parents are rather killing themselves to satisfy their children, without analyzing whether their desire is genuine or not.

In order to bring discipline in the house, we have to change ourselves first. We can, perhaps, look for a balance. We should neither be rigid like the parents three to four decades back nor be as susceptible as parents are today. Love and understanding is the answer to many problems. Don't show your love by giving the children a new dress or a visit to a mall but by giving them the assurance that you care for them.

Give them quality time, ask them about their problems and offer solutions to them. Freedom of choice should be there, but certain checks are necessary, in tune with one's financial condition.

The child's freedom of speech should be moulded and improved with love. We should be role models for our children. We must behave in the manner that we want them to behave. Don't discipline your child by beating, thrashing or kicking.

Children should have faith in you and be convinced that you are always available for them. Give your child a space to grow. Don't impose too many dos and don'ts but teach the child to be independent at an early age.

A daily prayer schedule is important.

Indiscipline in the classroom

- ✱ Not checking over school work;
- ✱ Not ensuring neatness of school work and general personal tidiness;
- ✱ Working over items they got incorrect;
- ✱ Not doing homework or just doing it to have something to show;
- ✱ Not revising for tests;
- ✱ Waiting for the last minute to do homework and projects;
- ✱ Not caring for personal items;
- ✱ Refusal to take advice;
- ✱ Doing other things in class while the teacher is teaching;

These are real problems which teachers face on a daily basis in class rooms across the country.

Children are no longer accountable for their actions. This is creating a multitude of problems as children are not responding to teachers so the education process is failing.

A child gets an item wrong, instead of taking the advice of the teacher to do the corrections, the child keeps getting the same item wrong continuously. They are content to just get an X next to it and that's the end. No learning occurs; maybe it is the teachers' fault for not being sterner. Or could it also be the parents' fault for not making the child accountable?

- ◆ Children must know that they are accountable to their teachers and parents. The Teacher and Parents must work in partnership so that the child will know that all concerned parties are on his case.
- ◆ Punishment at home and at school must be similar. If a child doesn't do homework, he is kept in during break time to complete it. At home he should also be grounded to complete given tasks.
- ◆ There should be a set procedure of monitoring the child at home and school. Don't allow the child to dupe you into believing him to get what he wants. If he is in making excuses for not attending school, check with the teacher/school.
- ◆ Avoid "covering up" for children. If they didn't do assignments for no good reason, don't make excuses for them. Let them face the consequences so that they will know the importance of meeting deadlines.
- ◆ Be consistent, don't be flexible with rules. Let the child know that rules are not negotiable.
- ◆ Talk to your child about events in school, out of school so that you get an insight into their thinking. Show children the importance of being disciplined.

It is now clear that the threats we faced as kids are in no way comparable to the challenges our kids face today. They need all the love, support, guidance, care and advice that they can get. We have to make time for our children because there are many negative forces out there that are only too willing to listen to and encourage our children. Let us all make a concerted effort to save and protect our children. The signals from society are not promising. We need to preserve our children.

It is hoped that this article will jolt us and help us understand what our kids face on a daily basis. Some topics, while we consider them taboo, are very real to our children.

Children are crying out for attention and help. Let us be there to answer.