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Unseen Child Abuse

Pay Attention to Subtle Signs

By Sita-Marie Pillay

We think that we can spot child abuse. We search for bruises on the skin of the kid in the back of the class. We wonder about the child who resists going to the restroom. But can we spot emotional and mental abuse? How about the child who doesn't show any signs of flinching or anger, the child who smiles and laughs and goes through life putting others first and being self-reliant? Do we stop and wonder what experiences might have matured that child so young?

The law in California defines child abuse as emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. In this article, however, I am less concerned with the legal definitions of abuse and more with spotting subtleties that convince us that a child needs help.

In most cases, the abuser is someone a child knows.

As a psychologist working in community mental healthcare, I have seen child abuse present in

many ways. The visible signs of physical abuse—bruises and scars—can be easy to recognize. The signs of neglect are subtler: for instance, being unkempt or chronically unwell, not going to school or the doctor. Sexual abuse leaves marks in areas that clothing typically covers so that the emotional symptoms may be the most evident.

Just being curious can be powerful for you and the victim.

Emotional abuse can be the most difficult to spot of all, as repeated insults, manipulation, isolation, brainwashing, and withholding of love and support all too often leave no visible signs.

Many of us in helping and childcare professions are trained to look for physical signs of abuse, but we also know there are invisible scars. How do any of us who care for children spot those signs of abuse? Regularly checking in with children regarding their feelings of safety, invisibility, and hurt can be immensely helpful. Instead of dismissing how they're feeling, ask "What's going on for you right now?"

It may seem daunting to ask a 16-year-old, let alone a two-year-old, this question. But children often express surprising insight, and they can give valuable information when asked. So query, "Where does it hurt? Who made the ouch?" Listen to what they say when they point to their heart versus their arm; notice if their ears get hot.

In most cases, the abuser is someone a child knows. This is terrifying and makes it seem that there is little you can do, but there are ways that you can help. Just being curious can be powerful for you and the victim. In some cases, it could be the difference between life and death.

Because childhood abuse is not uncommon, you may know abuse survivors. And these survivors may say things like, "Well I got through that. It was normal, and I'm fine." I want you to ask yourself, are they fine? Or could they have been spared a lifetime of emotional and physical consequences if, during their youth, one of their teachers or caregivers had intervened?

Psychologists like myself are trained to look for signs of abuse, and we are legally bound to report it to Child Protective Services. However, the tremendous power to recognize and prevent child abuse really

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lies with the millions of parents, caregivers, and teachers that daily interact with children. You live with them, you work with them, and you see the micro changes in behavior and body language that a mental

health clinician may not have a chance to notice. You see whether or not a child is really smiling with their eyes or just with their lips. You see if there are changes in how they're walking and talking, or if tantrums seem more intense. If you report what you see, even if only to a friend or a therapist like me, you can make a difference in a child's life. ❖



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