

The Weekly

CHILD ABUSE SCOURGE AFFECTS ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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The road to adulthood is a rocky one for many of South Africa's 19 million children. Not only are the odds stacked against them socio-economically, countless face abuse which affects their academic performance and may ultimately lead to diminished opportunities.

The Free State is home to nearly one million of the country's children. Although the number of cases of ill-treatment and neglect towards children decreased by nearly 23% between 2009/2010 and 2010/2011, the province still has the second highest incidence of this crime in the country – 12.3%. This is almost double the national average of 6.9%, according to the latest police crime statistics.

The Children's Act 38 of 2005 defines abuse as "any form of harm or ill-treatment deliberately inflicted on a child". This includes assault or deliberate injury, sexual abuse or allowing sexual abuse, bullying by another child, a labour practice that exploits a child, and exposing or subjecting a child to behaviour that may harm the child psychologically or emotionally.

The tragedy is that children might not even be aware that they are being abused.

A lecturer from the University of Zimbabwe, Kudzai Chinyoka, told the Annual Southern African Society for Education at the Central University of Technology in Bloemfontein that one of the major reasons for low performance in schools is child abuse. "Domestic violence can influence a child's cognitive capabilities."

She said children who are subjected to domestic violence experience adverse effects such as psychological stress, lack of communication, and low self-esteem. "Children are 15 times more likely to feel the effects of child abuse and are likely to be disturbed academically." Chinyoka said that it was important for community members to expose abuse so that children receive the help they need.

An educator at Ntebaleng Intermediate School in Botshabelo, Cholofelo Seiphemo, said she deals with problems related to HIV/Aids, poverty, and lack of food – and this affects the ability of children to concentrate.

"Some children do not have parents. They come to us and seek help. Some do not even eat for days on end. And when they have families, these families spend the grant money on frivolous things." Seiphemo said she has bought shoes for children on numerous occasions, only to see them barefooted again the next day. "Some of these parents will sell the shoes and buy alcohol with the money."

Seiphemo recalled the case of two girls who were orphaned after their mother died of Aids. Their grandmother, who took care of them, passed away shortly afterwards. The eldest was left to fend for her siblings. This 17-year-old girl later fell pregnant after being taken advantage of by older men and struggled to take care of her siblings, even though she received a grant.

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Although not abused in their home, child-headed households are often vulnerable to abuse by community members because of their need for money, food, and security.

Dikeledi Motaung decided to speak to The Weekly about her abuse as a child. Her father spent most of his childhood behind bars. When he was released, he would beat her to “keep her out of trouble”. “He would come get me at parties. This other time, he came carrying a gun and threatened to shoot me. He hit me with it behind my head and I fell down.” Motaung dropped out of school because she fell pregnant and with her father in and out of prison, she had little support raising her child.

According to Seiphemo, some of these children have relatives who either do not want to help them or do not have the means to. She said problems at home tend to affect the results of learners. “You see the attitudes of the learners changing and their behaviour becomes erratic.”

Seiphemo added that sometimes it is difficult to detect the abuse but when teachers do, they register a case with the police and take children to educational psychologists. “We would also try to get closer to the child, not force them, but try to get them to talk about it.” Educators are required by law to report suspected child abuse to the authorities.

The spokesperson for the Free State Department of Education, Howard Ndaba, said the department offers psychological therapy to learners at a district level. “In the districts, we have psychologists and social workers who are allocated to schools and we also provide training to teachers to support learners.” According to Ndaba, schools identify abused learners to the district. “Schools refer identified learners to the district for further support or evaluation and intervention.”

Ndaba said awareness campaigns were held at schools to ensure that learners are informed of the channels they can use if they are suffering abuse. He added that the department reports serious cases of abuse to the police in order to protect the child.

According to the spokesperson for the Department of Social Development Ipeleng Morake, the department is not directly linked to the counselling of abused children in schools. “Our role is only secondary. The Department of Education has educational psychologists who deal with that.”

Morake said although the department has social workers, they have to let the education psychologists determine the extent of the problem and if it needs greater attention, intervene at a secondary level. Both departments work in collaboration with regards to the referral of learners and work on shared projects.

Children who are being abused can contact Childline or speak to their educators for assistance. Learners and parents can also contact the education department’s district office.

Childline can be contacted at 08000 55 555.

[Source. www.theweekly.co.za]