

Intro to Abuse

Why it is difficult to talk about abuse:

Abuse is unspeakable.

Unnecessarily suffering is confusing and disorganizing.

Evil is terrifying.

Abuse is controversial.

Abuse is personal.

Abuse is systemic.

Child abuse as defined by lawyers and politicians:

Any **recent** act or failure to act on the part of a **parent or caretaker** which results in **death, serious** physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or An act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of **serious** harm.

The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (**CAPTA**) as amended by the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003

A public health oriented definition:

Child Maltreatment:

All forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power.

The World Health Organization

A comparison of Perpetrator-centric and Survivor-centric definitions of abuse:

- What the abuser did vs. What did the abused experience.
- Is it a crime? vs. Who was hurt?
- What did the abuser intend? vs. What did the abused person experience?

Tentative conclusions about language

- **When** the abuse happened has nothing to do with whether or not it was abuse.
- It can be abuse even if the person doing the harm does not intend to harm and even if the person being harmed is not currently aware of the harm being done. It can even be abuse if there is no harm done.
- The more harm done the less intentionality matters.
- Sometimes the language of *prejudice* or *insensitivity* is more useful than the language of abuse.
- The language of abuse seems to be most useful when the focus is specific and personal. The more a 'class' of abusers and a 'class' of abused people is in focus the more likely other language will be helpful.

Tentative conclusions about language

- The greater the power differential between the person who does the harm and the person harmed the more likely it is that the language of abuse will be useful.
- The language of abuse shows up frequently in political discourse but is not always helpful in that context.

Abuse Over the Life-Span:

Pre-natal and infant abuse:

- Prenatal and Neonatal Exposure to Tobacco Smoke
- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD)
- Shaken Baby Syndrome
- Genderside?
- Abortion?

Child Abuse:

- Incest/Sex Abuse
- Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children
- Child labor/slavery
- Physical discipline/spanking
- Bullying
- Loss of childhood

Abuse Over the Life-Span:

Abuse in Adolescence:

Dating/Courtship Violence

Rape

Hazing

Female Genital Mutilation

Abuse in Adults:

Domestic Violence

Marital rape

Sexual harassment

Exploitation of Immigrants

Abuse Over the Life-Span:

Abuse in Seniors:

Abuse by care-providing relatives (“granny
battering”)

Nursing Home Abuse

Spouse Abuse Grown Old

Abuse of aging care-providers by elderly care-
recipients

Conclusion:

There is no period in life that is free from the potential for abuse.

The life-time risk of abuse is therefore much higher than the risk of experiencing any single kind of abuse during one season of life.