

INSIDIOUS:
CHILD ABUSE FESTERS UNSEEN IN HOOD COUNTY

Making an abuser

What causes violence against children

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HOOD COUNTY NEWS

Beaten to death; molested; deprived of food; tortured - when reading about violence against children, an inevitable question arises: What makes a person do this to a child?

The causes of child abuse are complicated and multi-faceted, according to Layna Lankford, the clinical director at Paluxy River Children's Advocacy Center.

"Very often child abuse is a cycle within families and encompasses multiple generations," she said. "Attachment wounds and disorders can become a culture within a family and it can be difficult for that cycle to be broken. Because the pattern has been around so long, they don't know anything different."

But the potential reasons for a person becoming an abuser don't stop there - they are virtually limitless, according to Lankford.

"There's any number of reasons," she said. "From a person being abused themselves to it being a learned behavior. Perpetrating child abuse can also be a result of stress, substance use or abuse; it can also be a result of mental health disorders. So, there isn't really one cause or another. And that is true across all types of abuse - emotional, physical, sexual, and neglect. There can be any number of reasons a person chooses to abuse a child."

In addition to these factors, the differing perspectives on what child abuse entails present challenges; some parents don't realize that their behavior is abusive, Lankford said.

"What we know to be abuse - and especially emotional abuse and physical abuse - what we know to be harmful to children, a lot of people don't necessarily consider abuse. So they don't even recognize it as being unhealthy, or being harmful parenting or poor treatment of children," she said.

Lankford has been working with victims of child abuse for over 12 years.

"For me, it changed the way I saw the world," she said. "Things that you only hear about in movies and TV shows become real. And even though you knew they're real before, it's different."

When she first began working with child abuse survivors, she became jaded by the horrifying treatment of children that she saw.

"I think, initially, how it changed

my worldview for the worse is just kind of seeing what people are capable of, and really knowing it - it being a part of my everyday world," she said. "When I learned how often it happens - it is much more than most people are aware of."

But over time, her perspective has been modified by experience.

"Because I learned how prevalent child abuse is, the question I ask about people (now) is what happened to them, regardless of what's going on. Even if it's somebody with a severe personality disorder, people

who abuse children, even psychopaths and sociopaths," she said. "I see all of that behavior through the lens of what causes a person to do things like that. So, 'What happened to them?' rather than, 'What's wrong with them?' Because I know the impact that (child abuse) has on the brain and development."

This shift in perspective fuels her desire to find solutions for child abuse.

"I think it kind of transitioned from a place of realizing what people are capable of to just realizing that

there's this problem in our society and we gotta find a way to fix it. We gotta find a way to deal with it. Because it's absolutely fixable. It is," she said.

"There's a quote that we use a lot and it's, 'Hurt people hurt people.' And so I tend to see those who hurt people as being hurt. It strengthens my resolve to help hurt people, because that's really the way that we're going to end it - to help hurt people heal so they don't feel the need to pass on their hurt."

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SOURCE: KARLI SMITH AND TRACI COOPER

PROTECTION: How to keep your children safe

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abuse when it's happening.

"It happens, a lot of times, in private circumstances, and private places, with not a lot of people around," District Attorney Ryan Sinclair said. "Child abuse is something that doesn't occur with a lot of witnesses. Oftentimes, the only witness is the perpetrator and the child. Because perpetrators don't abuse kids where a lot of people can see them do it."

However, there are some signs and symptoms for which Hood County residents can keep an eye out, according to Cooper. These range from unexplained injuries to subtle changes in behavior, she said. See the accompanying list of red flags on page one.

The easiest way for the community to stop child abuse is to be observant, according to Sinclair.

"Surely, if somebody sees a child being abused, they would stop it," he said. "But a lot of times you don't see that. So I think the critical thing is, if you do see strange things, or things that seem odd or out of the ordinary, you need to question those circumstances. And if you see something, say something. Certainly, if you see a child being abused, stop it immediately and call the cops and report it. But most of the time you're not going to see somebody walking down the street and see child abuse going on."

In addition to watching for physical and behavioral signs of abuse on children, residents of Hood County should be wary of those around them - even when they seem safe to trust, according to Cooper.

This is true for organizations that hire child care workers, like churches, she said.

She listed an example in her own

life, from an organization years ago: Cooper wanted to work with the children there, and they didn't require a background

check for her because they knew her. "That made me go, 'Oh gosh guys, y'all can't do this,'" she said. "We can't just be like, 'Oh yeah, no big deal (about who watches children)!'"

The supervisor knew her well, but that shouldn't be enough to grant access to children, according to Cooper.

Even background checks aren't always enough; if the predator hasn't already been caught, then they will clear a background check. Cooper encourages churches and other organizations that hire child care workers to carefully interview and use vetting procedures with anyone working with children.

She encourages parents to be skeptical of adults who spend time with their children. For example, parents can prevent predators abusing their children by showing up earlier than expected if someone is babysitting, or checking in frequently, she said.

"If you have your own children, you should not just trust whoever, just because they seem like a nice person," she said.

If parents or supervisors for child care feel, in any way, uncertain about someone, they should pay attention to those concerns, according to Cooper.

"I do believe we have an intuition, and sometimes you just feel weird around someone," she said. "And there's probably a reason for that." Sometimes, it's best to trust your

"I believe with all my heart that if our kids are aware that these things can happen, then that's the best protection..." Traci Cooper, community education coordinator

gut, according to Cooper.

"Listen to that," she said. Discussing concerns with children is important if a parent feels reservations about an individual; if the children are aware of these concerns and feel safe talking to their parents about it, that can be a prevention for child abuse, Cooper explained.

PREPPING YOUR KIDS

It is essential for residents to communicate with their children about red flags to look out for, according to Cooper.

"I believe with all my heart that if our kids are aware that these things can happen, then that's the best protection," she said. "If they're learning the signs that somebody might be grooming them to abuse them, then that's a huge prevention."

It's also important to teach kids that they have autonomy over their bodies, according to Cooper.

"That's one of the main things we talk about with the youngest kids - that they can say no to a hug. They don't have to say yes," she said. "Because kids are taught to obey adults, so then they're confused (about what to do when an adult abuses them)."

"You should educate your kids yourself - have that conversation with your kids, even though it's hard."

Resources to help parents have these conversations will be added

soon to the Paluxy River Children's Advocacy Center's website, according to Cooper.

The center, according to Cooper, tells children to have safe adults in their lives who:

1. The child can talk to and they will listen.
2. The child knows will get them help.
3. The child knows will believe them.
4. Is not the person who is hurting them.

"We also tell them that if they tell an adult, and that adult does not help them or believe them, they need to tell another safe adult," Cooper added.

The key to parents protecting their kids, according to Sinclair, is "being involved in their kids' lives - being an involved parent, taking an active interest in their children and their day-to-day activities, monitoring who their children spend time with, and educating their kids on appropriate adult-child behavior and what to look out for. And encouraging their kids that if something does happen, that they can feel safe in reporting what happened to them."

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