

INSIDIOUS: CHILD ABUSE FESTERS UNSEEN IN HOOD COUNTY

'No physical evidence whatsoever'

Why some child abuse goes unreported

BY CHRISTINE DORAN
HOOD COUNTY NEWS

Every day, children suffer abuse, from unjustified beatings, to molestations, to venomous words. But what is done about it depends on the type of abuse. Physical abuse is significantly more likely to be reported than emotional or sexual abuse – but that doesn't mean it occurs more.

Evidence is usually only visible when physical child abuse occurs, making sexual and emotional child abuse difficult to prove and prosecute, according to District Attorney Ryan Sinclair and Layna Lankford, the clinical director of Paluxy River Children's Advocacy Center.



Sinclair

"Emotional abuse is difficult," Lankford said. "It's probably the one that happens the most and can be the most damaging. Emotional abuse and neglect are often mentioned together and are the hardest to prove because it is difficult to prove intention. Emotional abuse leaves no bruises – no physical evidence whatsoever."

Not only is it difficult to identify and prove as a third party, it's also often not recognized as abuse by the victims, she said.

"A lot of times (victims) just know, 'This doesn't feel good,'" she said. "So in a counseling session they might talk about something that happens at home that they didn't like, and we recognize it as emotional abuse – and may even make a report to CPS (Child Protective Services) – but it's not anything that can actually be investigated."

Emotional abuse can include a variety of seemingly inconsequential behaviors.

"It can be anything from unintentional neglect as a result of parental depression to deliberate verbal abuse

– that's emotional abuse and neglect because the parent isn't engaged with the child in an appropriate attachment relationship. So, yeah. It really

"One in four girls, before the age of 6, is going to be sexually abused, and one in six boys, before age 6. One in 10 is going to tell. And then you're looking at that going, 'What about the other nine?'"

Margaret Cohenour

Executive Director of Paluxy River Children's Advocacy Center

kind of spans a pretty wide definition," Lankford explained.

However, emotional abuse and neglect is not always criminal, according to Sinclair.

"Surely they need to address those issues through counseling and other avenues, but it doesn't mean it's a crime," he said.

Neglect becomes criminal when it enables other forms of abuse, according to Sinclair.

"Committing a crime comes into play when you do something like date someone who abuses your child and you know about it and you continue to leave your child in that person's care when you go to work, knowing that they're abusing your child, or knowing that your child comes up with strange bruises, to which explanations don't make sense," he said. "That's a criminal act potentially."

So behaviors by parents can be abusive by a therapist's definition and still not rise to the level of a criminal offense, he explained.

Emotional abuse and neglect is the most common form of child abuse, but it's the least addressed and most difficult to mitigate, according to Lankford.

"Emotional abuse is probably the least (reported), if I was going to guess. And it's hard to even make

a guess, because emotional abuse is so subjective that it's really not even something that the Department of Family and Protective Services can in-

vestigate," she said.

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"One in four girls, before the age of 6, is going to be sexually abused, and one in six boys, before age 6. One in 10 is going to tell. And then you're looking at that going, 'What about the other nine?'" Cohenour said.

It's difficult to identify sexual abuse as a third party, so it often remains unreported, according to Lankford.

"Physical abuse is usually discovered because of the physical evidence. So sexual abuse – there often is no physical evidence. The only way anyone's ever going to know is if they're caught red-handed or if a child tells someone – mostly likely that's how it's going to be discovered," she said. "Physical abuse is more often reported, I think for sure, because there is physical evidence."

WHY SOME VICTIMS DON'T REPORT

The reasons for children not reporting their abusers vary as well; but there are some common factors, according to Lankford.

"The one we hear most often is they were afraid or they didn't think any-

body would believe them," she said.

Moreover, many kids want to protect their abusers, or they don't know they're being abused, according to Lankford.

"Depending on your source, 85 to 95% of child sex abusers are someone that the child knows and loves," she said. "And they don't want to lose the person. They have a strong bond with the person. They trust them, they love them, and they have no idea that what's going on is not supposed to be happening a lot of times."

Abusers often use threats to prevent a child from reporting them, according to Lankford; the combination of the child's trust in their abuser and their fear of consequences, paired with their concern that they won't be believed, often stops them from speaking out about it.

"So those children who don't tell about being sexually abused – it's usually either because they think no one will ever believe them because they're kids and people don't believe kids," Lankford said. "Too, they've been threatened to not tell – they've been threatened that the person's going to hurt their family. Or it's very often someone that they know and love."

Because of this, it is important that community members report any suspicion they have, according to Sinclair and Lankford.

Every adult in Texas is a mandated reporter of child abuse, meaning that there is a legal obligation to report any suspicion of child abuse or neglect, even if the reporter has no proof.

"One thing that the community can do is be a safe adult to a child – just investing in kids, and being there for kids and listening to kids," Lankford said. "And number one is believing kids if they ever tell you something like this. Because kids don't typically make this stuff up. So believe them, because kids need safe adults."

christy@hcnews.com | 817-573-7066, ext. 254



ALWAYS ON ALERT: Survivors of child abuse frequently suffer lifelong effects

from the trauma inflicted on them, from mental health disorders, such as anxiety

and depression, to physical diseases, such as heart disease and cancer. One clinical

director describes the gravity of the conditions and what causes them below.

TRAUMA: Survivors ... 'They've learned that the world is not safe'

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be more severe for the victims is yet to be seen, according to Lankford.

"A traumatic event isn't traumatic by the definition of the event," she said. "It's traumatic based on how it's experienced by the individual."

Due to COVID-19, child abuse reports have plummeted; but the reports coming in are more severe, according to District Attorney Ryan Sinclair. Local nonprofit leaders and officials worry kids are being abused without receiving help due to the coronavirus conditions.

"If the risk factors in the family are already high and you add the stress of the current situation on top of that, then the risk that there's going to be some kind of abuse in the home is absolutely going to increase," Lankford said.

(See full story about COVID-19's impact on child abuse reports in last Wednesday's issue).

Mental health professionals won't know how deeply COVID-19 has im-

acted the victims until they begin counseling, according to Lankford.

But COVID-19 has added yet another challenge for victims of child abuse: jury trials are being delayed until at least August.

"Trials are not going on right now at all," Sinclair said. "They have been canceled for several months now."

Trials are a traumatizing experience for survivors of child abuse, according to Sinclair.

"We meet these folks in probably one of the worst times of their lives, and have to carry them through a

process that's not fun to go through. I mean, they (the family members) have to get up in front of a jury and everybody in the courtroom and then tell what happened to their family. And the victim has to get up and tell what happened to him or her," he said.

"That's not something that anybody wants to go through. You don't ask for that opportunity. If you had your druthers you would never, ever do that."

The delay has an impact on victims of child abuse and their families, who now have to wait longer for their perpetrators to be prosecuted, according

to Sinclair.

"Everybody's anxious about everything right now, and for those families, this is just one more thing – one more thing that they would be happy, I'm sure, to put behind them," he said. "And right now they've got to wait just a little while longer."

Sinclair and Lankford emphasized the importance of the community reporting any suspicion of child abuse.

"There's a saying in child abuse, 'A hurt child is everyone's business.' And I don't know whether or not people realize how true that really is," Lankford said. "There's a huge financial cost to society per child who experiences traumatic child abuse. It extends all the way into adulthood from lost wages, to Medicaid and Medicare costs, sick days at work, substance abuse, and criminal activity. So we appreciate everyone who is part of the fight, because it takes everybody."

christy@hcnews.com | 817-573-7066, ext. 254

See something? Say something

■ If you or someone you know may be a victim of child abuse, call the child abuse hotline: 1-800-252-5400 or report online at: www.txabusehotline.org

■ Texas law states that anyone who suspects a child is being abused, neglected, or exploited is required to report it to Department of Family and Protective Services. If you do not report suspected abuse, you can be held liable.