

A Survey of Child Abuse and Neglect in Belize City

By
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NEGLECT IN BELIZE CITY

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The Council on Child Abuse and Neglect may want to pay special attention to the following points that come from the report.

1. Since a large proportion of parents and guardians are aware of the problematic nature of child care and would approve of assistance from voluntary associations, no doubt they would be open to initiatives coming from the Council.
2. The Council should direct its efforts to limiting physical punishment in the home and school.
3. In doing so the Council should focus on the overall area of disciplining within the home and school. It should encourage alternative methods of discipline, including the use of rewards that reinforce good behaviour, greater use of parental warmth and affection, and actions that encourage the self-esteem of children within the peer group.
4. In mounting their programme the Council should pay special attention to the times in the year when child abuse and neglect cases predominate and to the situations where they occur, both of which are highlighted in this report.
5. The Council should seek to work along with organizations that could improve the economic well being as this would contribute to an improvement in the care of children.
6. The Council should play an active role in generating an awareness of child abuse and neglect especially at the level of the neighbourhood. The housewives interviewed in the survey were hesitant to speak of cases that are occurring in their immediate environment.
7. The Council should work closely with government and other organizations in improving the moral, social, and physical welfare of children.
8. Because there is presently no organization in Belize that advocates the proper treatment of children, the Council can be a very productive organization.

Introduction

In October, 1984 the National Child Abuse and Neglect Council asked me to conduct a study to arrive at a statement on what is child abuse and neglect within the Belizean society. This would help them to define their approach to the topic as they sought to undertake a programme that addresses this problem.

In consultation with a subcommittee of National Child Abuse and Neglect Council members, I drafted an outline of the study. It would feature a set of three different questionnaires directed at housewives, children, and resource persons involved in child abuse and neglect cases. Volunteers would conduct the interviews after receiving some training.

The scope of the study had to be adjusted because of problems occurring during the course of the project. Instead of interviewing 200 housewives drawn from different socioeconomic strata, we ended up with only 51 drawn mostly from poorer sections of Belize City. We did better with school children. Out of a target figure of 100 we interviewed 70. We interviewed four resource persons out of the ten we had projected.

The study itself has been an experiment in research methods. The members of the Mothers Union, Wesley Women's League, and others who volunteered to do the fieldwork were not 'your professional' interviewers. To most of them it was a new experience being undertaken out of an interest to learn at first hand about child abuse and neglect. This zeal to become involved in community work provided the motivation for the fieldwork. The fact that about twenty women participated shows that it is possible to have lay persons engage in data collection on a topic of such vital importance to all of us citizens.

In designing the questionnaire, I started from the viewpoint of child abuse and neglect as being only aspects within the wide range of the treatment of children. To arrive at them one should look at the treatment the children receive within the home, the school, and the larger community. Gradually, one arrives at the attitude and practices of

adults on the disciplining of children, their punishment, neglect, and abuse. This differs from the perspective of researchers with a strict psychological bias who would start off by defining the different kinds of child abuse and neglect and finding out whether they exist within the community or not.

Finally, I had to be careful in broaching the topic of child abuse and neglect in the questionnaire as it is a taboo topic for parents and children alike. With all the precautionary steps I undertook, we have detected in the analysis a certain amount of reluctance among the housewives to talk about child abuse and neglect cases within their home and their immediate neighbourhood.

✓ This study makes no pretension to being representative of the general opinion of Belize City people. The study sample was not drawn up through any scientific method. It is by nature a preliminary effort done to elicit response on aspects of child abuse and neglect. Its strength lies in being the first attempt to research this topic in Belize. Ultimately, it is designed to provide some guidelines for the National Child Abuse and Neglect Council to direct its own efforts. The Council or other agency may want to undertake a follow-up study in Belize City and the rest of the country.

With the overwhelming bombardment on us from TV and the print media, it becomes increasingly difficult to define anything as Belizean, much less something as pervasive as child abuse and neglect. However, if we are to deal with it as a problem within our own midst, we have to go back to the socio-cultural context within which it takes place. This statement is an attempt to focus on what three groups of Belizeans reveal through a battery of questions what they regard as aspects of child abuse and neglect.

The exercise leading to this report has been completely voluntary on the part of several persons. A subcommittee of the National Council on Child Abuse and Neglect helped in designing the study. The respondents took time to answer the many questions. Members of the Mothers Union, Wesley Women's League, and others freely gave of their time in conducting the interviews. Two teachers helped with the analysis of the

data. They are Sonia Abrahams and Heraldo Flowers. Nancy Lundgren, a visiting anthropologist researching child rearing in Belize, helped with the analysis and offered insight based on her own observations. The Staff of the UWI Department of Extra-Mural Studies (Belize) provided the secretarial help and all the many other bits of paper work from the beginning of the project to the end. The Department also helped with the stationery and the equipment to reproduce copies. The Ministry of Local Government, Social Services, and Community Development donated some stationery. This extensive voluntarism and goodwill is an illustration of the national determination necessary to confront child abuse and neglect in our society.

Summary

This study is the result of a survey of 51 housewives, 70 school children, and 4 resource persons involved in dealing with child abuse and neglect cases in Belize City. In the questionnaires administered to housewives and school children there was an attempt to review different kinds of treatment the children receive at home, school, and their immediate neighbourhood. The parents regard child abuse and neglect as primarily the neglect of children by careless parents/guardians. To the children it is physical punishment which they receive both at home and at school. The resource persons all agree that child abuse and neglect is on the increase in Belize City. They add that it takes several forms of both abuse and neglect and that it is caused by various factors, such as worsening economic conditions, breakdown of law and order, alcohol, and drug abuse.

PART ONE - HOUSEWIVES

A. Identification. A total of 51 housewives were interviewed subdivided into the following levels of education - 29 finished primary school; 19 finished secondary school; and 3 finished postsecondary school. They were caring for 188 children subdivided almost equally into three age groups - 52 were between 0-4 years, 64 between 5-9 years, and 67 between 10-14 years.

B. Household Conditions

1. Providing daily care. Almost $3/4$ (33) of the housewives themselves take care of the children during the day. Older children and other relatives take care of the children in the other cases.

2. Sleeping arrangements. There is evidence of overcrowding in terms of sleeping arrangements. In almost all households (48/51) two children were sleeping in one bedroom. In 23 cases more than three were sleeping in one bedroom.

3. Food preparation. More than half of the respondents (32/51) said that someone should plan the daily meals in the household. In response to the question on the guidelines they use to plan the meals, they gave almost the same number of points to the following - nutrition, availability of food items, their own choice, the children's choice, and cost. This substantiates the fact that the housewife uses a variety of options in selecting food items. It is worth noting, however, that among the above guidelines, nutrition and availability receive the highest number of points - 13 and 11 respectively.

The housewives were asked to list three items that they think are especially nutritious for children 5 to 14 years old. The following are the items with the number of points for each:

meat	34	vegetables	21	bread	3
milk	33	eggs	18		
fish	25	fruits	7		

The subsequent question asked how often they try to include these items in their meals. Twenty said 'when available' and 19 said daily. Generally, the response shows a high level of awareness of what are nutritious food items. Two areas suggest themselves for further attention.

One is improvement in the economic welfare to be able to afford the food items. The other is a need for nutrition education to widen the understanding on the nature and use of food appropriate to children.

4. Personal hygiene

Two questions were asked on personal hygiene, both revealing positive responses. In the first on bathing, almost all (47) said that the children bathe daily. In the second on changing clothes (42) said that the children change their clothes daily.

C. Role of Parenting

1. Opinion on role as a parent/guardian. The respondents were asked whether they consider the following as aspects of their role as parent/guardian - provide basic needs, provide warmth and affection, to help the child become a good person, all of the above, and other. Three-quarters (35) said 'all of the above'. Nine singled out 'to provide basic needs' and 4 'to provide warmth and affection'. There is a consensus among the housewives that their role as parent covers several aspects.

2. Learning about caring for children. Slightly more than half (27) said that they learned to care for children from their own parents and 18 said that they learned from their own experience. Most of the women would seem to be saying that in being a parent one is not only taking care of children under one's care. One is also indirectly teaching one's children how to behave as parents.

3. Reaction to caring for children as a problem. More than three-fourths (37) said that they would want some help in learning more about caring for children. Only 13 said 'no'. Thus, there is an awareness among most housewives that parenting is a problematic situation in which they could do with some help.

In identifying possible sources from whom they would want to receive help, they singled out voluntary organizations as being a likely source by 23 points. Ten said their spouse and 5 the parents of the child.

4. Relevance of religion and economic conditions. The respondents were split almost half/half on the influence of religion on

them as parents. Twenty-four said that religion was helpful to them in being able to care for children and twenty said no.

On the question whether they could better care for their children if their conditions were improved economically, the vast majority (39) answered yes and 11 no. The indication is that although religion is important, the economic situation is thought to be more crucial in determining parental behaviour.

D. Treatment of Children within the home

1. Rewards. Most women (49/51) reward their children when they do something well. Praise, gift giving, and showing affection are three ways of rewarding children, receiving 23, 16, and 12 points respectively. Most (46/51) said that they observed an improvement in the child's conduct as a result of rewarding him. In brief, women are aware of the positive contribution of rewards in the care of children.

2. Punishment. As in the case of rewards, most women (47/51) said that they punish their child when he does something that they disapprove of.

There is a wide range in the types of punishment that housewives are aware of. They include denial of privileges 18, whipping 17, spanking 8, and kneeling down 4. Whipping and spanking are both forms of physical punishment with the former being more severe. Together they make up the punishment that half of the women know about. Denial of privileges takes a close second place position.

Spanking, however, is the most frequently administered punishment. In answer to the question whether she spanked the child within the past two months, three-fourths (35) said yes, 15 no. But there was some ambivalence on revealing the frequency of spanking. Twenty said that they do not know how many times they had done so. Eighteen said that they spanked once a week and 7 said twice a week. It is significant that as many as slightly less than half admitted that they were spanking once a week.

There are several types of misconduct for which the child should be spanked. The two receiving the most points are fighting (14) and being cheeky (14). Lying receives 10, staying out late 9, and being careless with younger ones 6.

At what age should the child not be spanked any more? Twenty said 14 years of age; ten 9; the others mentioned ages ranging up to over 21. Generally, from the age of 10 spanking is gradually phased out as a punishment.

Physical punishment is rooted in the parent's own experience as a child. Twenty-two said that they had been spanked regularly as a child. Slightly less (19) said no and ten said that they do not remember. The large number who said no and that they do not remember probably indicates that the women do not want to reveal this aspect of their own experience as a child.

E. Reaction to Treatment in School

The acceptance of physical punishment within the household extends to the classroom. Whipping and spanking together receive 20/51 points as the kinds of punishment that housewives believe should be allowed at the elementary school. Other kinds of punishment found acceptable are detention 15, more homework 10, and scolding 3. It is worth noting that detention and more homework as two school-based kinds of punishment together receive 25 points, which is only 5 more than those for physical punishment. The conclusion seems to be that children should be physically punished whether they are in school or in the home. While at school, they could also receive other kinds of punishment.

The wide range of punishment mentioned underscores the attitude of the housewives on school as a context where strict discipline should be exercised. This is again substantiated by response to the following question - what is your response when your child informs you that he has been punished at school. Twenty-six - about one-half - said that they had no reaction. Sixteen said that they would question the child. Seven said that they would question the teacher. Two said that they would punish the child again.

The other question asks whether the housewife asks the teacher to punish her child. Twenty-nine said no and twenty-one said yes. Slightly less than one-half of the respondents have such a high regard for the school system that they are willing to extend to the teacher their parental right to discipline their child over and beyond what the teacher himself would normally do.

F. Attitude on Child Abuse and Neglect

The housewives regard the following as child abuse and neglect - cruelty 20, 'too much freedom' 12, not feeding child properly 11, and lazy parents. 'Too much freedom' means that the parent gives free rein to the children and does not discipline them sufficiently. 'Lazy parents' has a similar connotation, namely not careful enough to provide the right care.

It would seem that housewives focus more on neglect than on child abuse. There is only one of the answers that would fit in the commonly accepted notion of abuse. It is cruelty, which receives 20 points. The other answers refer more to neglect and receive 31 points. They are parents/guardians being too lax in disciplining children and not feeding them properly. The examples cited are usually younger mothers who leave their children at home 'to go hustle'.

There is another perspective on physical punishment that came through in answer to this question. Some women said that the motivation one has in administering the punishment helps to draw the line between being a good parent or being abusive. If one punishes the child 'to show him the right way', then one is doing one's duty. However, if one beats out of frustration or meanness, then one is being abusive.

There were three questions asking about the respondent's awareness of child abuse and neglect cases in her immediate neighbourhood and what she things should be done about them. These receive the least amount of answers among all the questions. Generally, the women said that they did not know of any. There were also few suggestions on what is causing the problem and on possible solutions.

The poor response rate to these questions is probably a reflection of women not wanting to admit to an outsider what is happening in their neighbourhood as a part of 'not interfering into other people's business'. The lack of answers on specific examples that may be occurring around them contrasts strikingly with the willingness to talk about child abuse and neglect cases in general. This underlines a more pervasive attitude we observed throughout the answers of the housewives on being hesitant to speak of child abuse and neglect as their own problem. It is obviously a highly charged topic that most people would prefer not to talk about

openly. This negative feedback indicates that child abuse and neglect is an overall problem that needs more probing within the community for a better appreciation of its scope. Earlier in the questionnaire as many as three-fourths of the respondents admitted that they could do with help in learning how to care for children. They are aware of it being a complex problem, although they are reluctant to discuss it in detail.

The added information in this report coming from the children themselves and some resource persons involved in child abuse and neglect cases is an attempt to arrive at a composite picture on the nature of this problem within Belize City.

PART TWO - CHILDREN

A. Identification. Seventy children were interviewed drawn from four schools - two on the southside and two on the northside. The age range is between 8 and 13, most of them being between 10 and 12. There were 39 boys and 31 girls.

B. Household Conditions

1. Duties at home. All children said that they were assigned duties at home. The duties were mainly dish washing and house cleaning (49) and doing errands (15).

2. Use of leisure hours. All except one said that they were allowed some free time during the day ranging from 1 to 6 hours, with most enjoying between 2 and 4 hours. During this time 27 said they watched TV, did a hobby, or played with friends; 20 said they played with friends, and 16 watched TV. As a single activity watching TV is next only to playing with friends as a favourite leisure activity.

3. Food. Most children 66/70 said that their meals were adequate. The reasons given were varied. Twenty-seven said that their meals were nutritious; 15 that they had sufficient food; 14 that they include a variety of foods; and 10 that the meals were delicious. The fact that so many classify their foods as 'nutritious' coincides with the statement by housewives that they use 'nutrition' most often as a criterion in selecting food items to cook. Whether the foods are 'adequate' or 'nutritious' may be subjective evaluation by both parents and children. What seems to be an underlying point is that both groups are satisfied with the home food and that they use 'nutrition' as a criterion of the good quality of food.

4. Personal hygiene. Most children (61/70) bathe daily. Similarly most change clothes daily. Again this supports the statement by housewives on a high level of personal hygiene being practiced by the children.

C. Treatment at Home

1. Rewards. To find out about the kind of rewards that the children most receive we asked the following question. When you do very well at specific tasks at home do(es) your parent/guardian(s) give you the

following rewards?

- a. tell you that you are doing well
- b. hug you or pat you fondly
- c. buy you something special
- d. all of above
- e. other

Most children 26/70 gave (d) as the answer. Twenty-two said 'buy something special', twelve 'tell you that you are doing well', and six 'hug you or pat you fondly'. Another question specifically asked what was the child's own favourite reward. Most said a gift or something bought specially for themselves. Only 15 said praise. The indication is that children expect and are receiving material things as rewards from parents/guardians more than other things, such as embrace, praise, etc.

2. Punishment, Most (67/70) children said that they are punished when they are guilty of misconduct. We included a list of various kinds of punishment and asked the children what they consider as 'bad'. The list includes -

- a. punish you by spanking with the hand, strap, or belt
- b. punish you severely by beating with a stick or other implement
- c. take advantage of you by demanding that you do something against your will
- d. deny you food, clothing, or something else that you need
- e. all of the above
- f. other kinds of activities

Forty-eight (48/66) said 'punishment by spanking with the hand, strap, or belt'. The next in number of points (8) is 'punish severely by beating with a stick or other implement'. The one receiving the least number of points is 'all of the above'. This supports the conclusion, also forthcoming from the statements by housewives, that physical punishment is the form of punishment that is being most inflicted on the children. Specifically, it is spanking with the hand, strap, or belt.

D. School Experience

All the children said that they liked coming to school. The three main reasons were to become educated, to learn, and to improve oneself

in life.

The kinds of rewards that they appreciate in school are verbal praise 46/70 and receiving a high grade 15/70. Public acknowledgement of good work through verbal praise means the most to the children. It is interesting to contrast this with experience in the home where receiving a gift takes great priority as against verbal and physical expression of appreciation. This is a good example of the usefulness of sanctions to children within the social context of the peer group as against personal gratification with a high grade.

The kind of punishment most often inflicted by the teachers is physical punishment by beating with strap, rope, or stick, which receives 42/70 points. Other kinds of punishment are kneeling down or standing on benches 14/70, scolding 7/70; other kinds of beating 5/70, and doing extra duties in the classroom 2/70. Here again we see physical punishment as a common form of discipline, just as it is in the home.

The punishment is inflicted for the following forms of misconduct - fighting 20/68, not doing assignments 19/68, playing in the classroom 18/68, and talking 7/68.

What is the reaction of the children to being punished in school? Most (40/68) said that they cry and feel sad; 17/68 accept their punishment as a normal part of school experience; 9 sulk and pout, and 1 said 'walk out of school'. Among the varying range of reactions to punishment, walking out of school is the least done. Rather, one reacts within the social context of the classroom and not abandon it. In fact, physical punishment to the children is a normal part of going to school.

E. General Awareness of Child Abuse and Neglect

The children were asked whether they know of child abuse and neglect cases among their classmates. They were asked specifically if they knew of examples of neglect, physical and sexual abuse, etc.

Twenty said that they did not know of any. The others gave the highest number of points to punishment by severe beating, 22, light spanking 15, denied basic needs, such as food and clothing 9, and being forced to do bad things 4. Physical punishment receives the highest score. However, the children reveal a significant awareness of

child abuse cases occurring around them. This contrasts with the hesitance of the housewives, also interviewed in this survey, to talk about occurrences in their neighbourhood.

The next question asked what should be done to the adults in the above cases. Most answered that they should be reported to the police 45/70. Only 15 said that they should be left alone. The consensus is that the adults indulging in abusive behaviour to children should be made to answer to the authorities.

With respect to the victims, most 47/70 said that they should be taken away from the adults. Twelve said that they should be left alone. Again, the respondents expressed a very strong reaction to the plight of children suffering child abuse and neglect.

Summary

The information supplied by the children supports most of that by the housewives. Within the household there is a high level of personal hygiene in bathing and the changing of clothes. There is generally some satisfaction with the foods served. The children are rewarded when they do well primarily by gifts and verbal praise. They are also punished mostly by spanking for misconduct within the home.

At school the housewives expect the child to be physically punished for misconduct and the children report this as the prevalent form of discipline. It is worth mentioning that fighting is reported by the children as the misconduct for which they are most often punished at school. This is also the misconduct for which parents most often punish their children. Thus, it seems that children take out their frustration through physical aggression against each other. In turn they are punished for doing so by themselves being physically punished. This seems to pinpoint the high value this society places on physical aggression not only as a means of settling interpersonal dispute but also as a means of disciplining aberrant behaviour.

There are two marked differences noticeable between the answers of the children and those of the housewives. One is the openness with which children talk about child abuse and neglect cases at home, school,

and their neighbourhood. It contrasts with the hesitation of the housewives to divulge such information. The other is that to the children physical punishment is the form of child abuse they most experience. The housewives, on the other hand, say that it is neglect caused by delinquent parents and guardians. The concensus from the two groups of informants is that both child abuse and neglect occur within the society. The following summary statement from another group of informants substantiates this conclusion.

PART THREE - RESOURCE PERSONS

We interviewed four resource persons who are well informed about the incidence of child abuse and neglect in Belize City. They are a principal teacher, social worker, community development officer, and a worker in the Social Development Department. They were asked eight questions. The following statement summarizes what they said.

Answers to Questions 1 to 3. 1. What specifically do you know about child abuse and neglect in Belize City? 2. In what capacity do you come into contact with child abuse and neglect cases? 3. Can you mention about three specific cases that come to mind? The respondents mentioned their work situation in which they come into contact with child abuse and neglect, giving some lurid examples, such as the maiming of children for committing minor misconduct.

The underlining impression coming from the respondents is that child abuse and neglect is the fault of the parents/guardians, who could not relate to children. They attribute this to several possibilities, such as frustration, ignorance, poverty, drug use, gambling, etc. The children, however, remain the victims, in most cases through no fault of theirs. One respondent said, "In some cases the child does nothing to trigger off abuse, but he or she just happens to be there at the time when the adult person becomes frustrated."

Answer to Question 4. Are there specific times when child abuse and neglect cases are most prevalent? The respondents said that the cases occur mostly during the summer holidays when the children are at home all day. Others occur frequently during festive holidays when parents indulge a great deal in merrymaking. Some occur during the night due to neglect from parents/guardians going out gambling or drinking.

There are also specific situations when certain kinds of abuses take place. Some respondents mentioned pre-schools, especially some that are run by unscrupulous persons in parts of the city.

Answer to Question 5. Are there groups from whom child abuse and neglect cases seem to be most prevalent? The respondents said that

they occur in all segments of the society. They occur most frequently, however, among large poor families with absentee parents. Some specific examples include homes where there is no resident male or where the children belong to different fathers resulting in alienation among the children or differential treatment from the mother or her current spouse. Briefly, there is consensus that the number of children in the home increases the incidence of abuse and neglect.

Question 6. In your opinion is there an increase or decrease in child abuse and neglect cases in the past few years? To what would you attribute it? The respondents all agreed that there has been an increase in cases in the past few years.

The reasons given are worsening economic conditions; too many fathers; lack of discipline in the home and community; alcohol and drug use; emigration to the U.S.; and lack of proper supervision of children.

Question 7. What steps should be taken to deal with the problem? Respondents suggested education as a major solution. Others mentioned are better laws; to set up a complaint bureau; parenting classes; close work with younger mothers; safe houses for child abuse and neglect cases; and supervision of day care services.

Question 8. Would you yourself want to become involved in group effort against it? Most said that they already were involved through their own job or personal interest.

