

## HOW TO PREVENT PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE LITTLE ONES

It affects one out of five families. Stimulating self-protection is central

By Valeria Shapira

By and large, the victims are the little ones -unbeknownst to them, they are subjected to the most sordid of worlds, that of child abuse. This aberrant event leaves sequelae and is much more frequent than it is believed; worldwide, approximately one out of five families has a child that is going through some kind of abuse, be it physical, emotional or sexual. But it so happens that in [the Province of] Salta [Argentina] (where, as of late, several cases have been detected), or wherever else it may be, the fact is that only a few stories come to light and only when the worst has already happened. Statistics attest: only one out of every ten cases of child sexual abuse is reported. However, many times these torments may be prevented. "Much is discussed about what has already taken place, but prevention, what the family may do, and the school and the community at large, is not taken into account " said to La Nación Lic. **Monica Diner**, Director of the Interdisciplinary Center for the Prevention of Child Abuse ([www.abusoinfantil.com](http://www.abusoinfantil.com)). "And a good prevention program must promote the child's self-protection capacity, affording children information on their rights". By definition, " Child abuse is any damage inflicted upon a child, repeatedly and in a manner other than accidentally, by a stronger and more powerful adult whom the child may be familiar with or not", she defines. Physical abuse is harmful to the body (blows, burns, wounds). Emotional abuse aims at self-esteem - mocks, insults -, and sexual abuse "consists in making the child participate in activities such as fondling or looking at the child's private parts, having the child fondle or look at the private parts of the perpetrator, enticing the child to watch obscene scenes and trying to or actually having sexual intercourse".

In any of its forms, abuse leaves its marks. "It is always traumatic," states the specialist. "In the case of sexual abuse, which is nowadays the most widespread, the abuse is something that the child cannot signify because he/she is not prepared to have sexual intercourse". Even if there are high-risk families where it is not easy to do prevention, **Diner** upholds that the community must be aware of how to prevent abuse. "Children are taught to take care of their bodies. Also, it is explained to them that there are private parts that must not be shown, that have to be preserved. It is also important to take into account children's feelings. "They should be able to identify what they like from what they do not." At the basis, is self-esteem". To be able to protect him/herself, the child needs to feel valued at home, at school, within the community; it is there that different prevention topics may be tackled.

### The Power of Blackmail

Abused victims may be males or females of different ages and social classes, although - states **Diner** - the largest percentage is physically maltreated males and sexually abused girls. At any rate, the issues to combat are perpetrator deceit and extortion, and their counterpart, child guilt and fear. "The perpetrator generally tries to blackmail. Extortion is giving something in exchange for doing something that must not be done. It may be something physical (a piece of candy, a toy) or in species (a promise to give a prize or do a favor)", explains the psychologist, who has authored Child abuse: Prevention and detection manual (Cepia, 1999). Conversely, " children must learn not to accept gifts or offers from strangers, even though the person may seem nice; nor should they accept them from people they are familiar with (it might even be their own parents; this is why the community at large must be committed to doing prevention) if they feel that something is wrong or confusing". On the other hand, the child has to know that there is nothing to be blamed for if he/she is not able to ward off danger or threats; this will help the child defend him/herself or ask for help. "Otherwise, if the aggression takes place, it may be seen as a well deserved punishment and thus, be accepted. It is the case of a little girl who worked for an abusing boss; she believed that apart from receiving a salary to help support her family, her duty was to allow maltreatment, "says Diner.

## Signs of Alarm

"In developed countries, like the United States, the topic is discussed at school and the Federal State is involved in preventive programs ", affirms the specialist who is the faculty responsible for the graduate course on Child Abuse and Prevention at the University of Buenos Aires. "In our country, it is necessary to create information and psychological, medical and legal assistance centers to reach everyone; centers to train teachers; massive campaigns; parental programs on how to look after their children's health; etc." However, adults should know how to recognize certain warning signs: if a child is being subjected to abuse, there may be changes in the child's behavior (inhibition, aggression), sleeping and eating disorders, migraine, enuresis, learning disorders and changes in sexuality; extreme inhibition (rejecting anyone's habitual contact) or premature erotization. And we should add the most obvious: blows, wounds or other physical injuries. Advise to protect children according to Lic. **Diner**, it is important to inculcate self-protection factors in children to allow them to defend themselves from perpetrators. "To do this, it is not necessary to talk specifically about sexual topics. Much in the same way as a child is told not to allow someone to stick a finger in their eyes, the child may also be taught likewise for other parts of the body," exemplifies **Diner**. Generally speaking, the basic topics to work on, both at school and within the family or community are: Self-esteem: Every child must know that he/she is important. Rights: Every child has a right to protect him/herself for the sake of his/her psychophysical development (not going with strangers, even if they seem good or say that they know their mom or dad; saying that he/she does not wish to go on playing if now they are disliking something they liked at the beginning; saying no to showing the parts of their bodies that are covered with a bathing suit). Caressing: to teach them that they must reject a caress if uncomfortable (and that caress is not exchangeable for candy or gifts). Responsibility: to explain that they will never be responsible for whatever evil thing may happen to them. Secrets: to say that only secrets related to good things must be kept (for example, a birthday party), but that bad things should not be concealed (for example, a neighbor who touches them or has an aggressive behavior). In brief, the NIC index -Spanish initials for the words No (reject the offer); Leave (the place as soon as possible); Tell (an adult that may be of help). Within the family environment, there are key interaction factors that may enhance prevention, such as respect (accepting everyone as such as affection (caressing and saying gratifying words), flexibility (giving adequate responses when the child asks), and values (they should be clear and consistent).