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We Haven't Always Had Child Abuse . . .

. . . at least, that's what people used to think. In olden days, children were simply possessions of their parents. No-one would dream of questioning a parent's explanation of what had happened to their own child. There was no such thing as a physically abused child, only a very 'clumsy' one who kept having accidents or a very 'naughty' one who needed to be punished.

In 1866, in the United States of America, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (the ASPCA) was formed, but there was no such society for children. Then, five years after the Society was started, an interesting case reached the news.

A little girl was being beaten every day by her stepmother, and people who knew about it wanted to protect her. But the stepmother was not breaking the law, and it looked as though there was nothing that could be done. In despair and frustration, the people trying to protect the child turned to the ASPCA.

The ASPCA took the case to court, and managed to prove that the term 'animal' could include a child. The little girl was saved from more abuse - and suddenly the general public woke up to the fact that there was no law against this sort of behaviour. There was outrage that the law did more to protect animals than it did children. So in 1871, five years after the ASPCA was started to protect animals, the Society for the Protection of Children was formed.

For the first time, people started to say that it was not entirely a parent's business what happened to a child. People started to accept that some injuries and even deaths of children were because their parents were ill-treating them. From that came an agreement that neglected and beaten children should be protected from their families.

A few years later, things started happening in the United Kingdom, too. The Reverend Benjamin Waugh was working as a priest in the slums of London, and he was shocked by the way many children were treated. He was determined to help the plight of children he saw being regularly abused and neglected. At that time, parents had absolute rights over their children unless they actually killed them. Any other type of cruelty was within the law. Just as in the United States, there was a law to protect animals, but not children.

The Reverend Waugh changed that with the formation of the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, in 1884. Five years later, it became the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, with Queen Victoria as its Royal Patron. This is the famous NSPCC we still have today. In those days inspectors patrolled the streets of London by bicycle, collecting vulnerable and ill-treated children and taking them to safety. These days there are telephone help lines, computer sites, drop-in centres and thousands of different projects going on every day across the country.

Even with the work of the NSPCC, it wasn't until the 1960s that Dr Henry Kempe introduced the term 'battered baby syndrome'. He did it to shock people into taking more seriously what he had been saying for years - that physical injuries on children were not always accidental. Sometimes, parents were deliberately harming or neglecting them.

In the 1970s people who were working with physically abused and neglected children began also to identify another kind of abuse. Some children were damaged, not by neglect or physical abuse, but by emotional bullying: constant humiliation or rejection, or terrifying a child.

Child sexual abuse was the last type of abuse to be properly recognised, in the 1980s. This is the most secret and silent of abuses; it does not usually leave physical clues, as neglect or

physical abuse might. People who work in child protection often say that sexual abuse is the most difficult abuse to deal with - but as our understanding grows, so does our knowledge of what to do about it.

Today, child protection is an essential part of the job for everyone who works with children - teachers, dinner ladies, social workers, doctors and nurses, police, childminders, youth workers - you name it, if it's a job that involves being with children, child protection will be on everyone's mind.

What Child Abuse Is . . . And What It Isn't

The definitions of child abuse in this book are based on a law called The Children Act 1989, which gave birth to most of the policies and procedures that child protection workers have to follow today.

In law you are a child from the day you are born until your 18th birthday. Even though you can legally consent to sex at age 16, child protection procedures can protect you from sexual abuse in the family for another two years after that. In very rare circumstances the child protection system can even protect an unborn baby by saying what must happen as soon as the baby is born e.g. it is not to be left alone with the parent.

Child abuse happens when someone who is connected by family to the child deliberately causes them harm. This person could be a parent or relative, step parent, family friend, someone who regularly babysits the child, and so on - anyone who has a close connection to the family, whether or not they are blood relatives.

One thing that abuse is not is an attack from a stranger. If a child is attacked and hurt by a stranger while out playing, for instance, it is not usually a child protection case. It is still a crime, of course, but it is one that the police will deal with in a different way to child abuse. They do not need to worry about whether the child will be safe at home with their family. Unless, that is, the child was out playing very late, or in a dangerous place, or there is some other reason to suspect that the family are not taking proper care of the child.

So, child abuse happens when someone who is supposed to be caring for the child turns on, and damages, the child in some way.

The term used by the law for this is 'significant harm'.

If a social worker and/or a police officer is told about a child by someone who is concerned about the child's safety, this concept of significant harm has to guide their thinking. Crossing the border from 'not the best way to bring a child up' or 'could be heading for trouble' to 'this child is actually in danger of being seriously hurt if we don't do something' is what makes a child protection case, rather than a case where a child is in need of some help, but not actually in danger from their own parents. Where that border is crossed is where 'significant harm' lies.

If significant harm has happened to the child - or if it seems likely it might happen - there will be a discussion usually involving social workers, police and other people who work with children such as teachers, nurses and so on. What happens at this meeting is covered later in this book, in the chapter called 'Child Protection Conferences'.

When people talk about abuse, they usually divide it into four different categories.

- Neglect

- Physical Abuse

- Sexual Abuse

- Emotional Abuse

In the following chapters we will look at what we mean by all these terms. We will also look at how abuse can happen and what you can do about it, whether it is you or someone you know that is at risk. There will also be information about some of the other things that can go wrong in families and put children at risk of being harmed, such as: domestic violence; alcohol-dependent parents; drug-dependent parents; parents with mental illness and racial abuse in the family.

At the end of the book is a list of websites and telephone numbers that will help you find out more. Keep them handy in case you - or a friend - ever need to use them.