

PROBLEMS IN FAMILIES

You have seen how a family develops, and the different compositions of a family. Now, you will learn about problems that arise from these relationships.

There are severe problems that need immediate attention. These are where families can no longer cater for the physical, effective and emotional needs of its members. They are called dysfunctional families. There are many causes of dysfunctional families. Some are inter-related and others are isolated. We will describe the problems that affect today's families which concern you. They are: child abuse, teenage pregnancy, alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, death/divorce/separation in the family, homelessness, poverty, and the uprooted family.

1. Child Abuse

The family is where a child is supposed to receive love and care, to build up a basic trust of the world and of other people. However, the cruel reality is that millions of children throughout the world each year have been abused by the people they love and trust the most - their own parents. This is the ultimate betrayal of trust.

There are many kinds of child abuse. There are physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and verbal abuse. Physical abuse may produce the 'battered-child syndrome'. In this case, a child's growth and development is seriously traumatized by harsh and cruel physical treatment. Emotional abuse and sexual abuse can be even more destructive than physical abuse in the long run. Often, they go undetected and unrecognized for many years, partly because the family tries to keep it a secret, or partly because some people simply do not believe that sexual abuse of a child can happen in the family. Victims of emotional or sexual abuse often have interpersonal problems as adults. They may go into fits of depression and have outbursts of hostility and anger that they cannot control or understand.

Incest is a form of child abuse where the parent or parent-like figure has sexual contact with the child. In many cases, a girl is the victim. The shame and guilt associated with this form of sexual abuse are so severe that they inevitably leave everlasting scars on the child's psychological adjustment.

Child neglect is also a common form of maltreatment, and the most destructive. Many deaths, injuries and long-term problems have been due to child neglect. In some cases, for example, infants are starved to death or undernourished. Some are undernourished emotionally - their parents rarely touch, talk or play

with them. Finally, many childhood accidents, which are the leading causes of childhood death and serious injury, can be traced to neglect.

Because children are dependent upon the care of parents, they usually have nowhere to turn when their own parents abuse them. Often social workers are the only support and hope they have.

2. Early Marriages and Teenage Pregnancy

Child Marriage is defined as a marriage of a girl or boy before the age of 18 and refers to both formal marriages and informal unions in which children under the age of 18 live with a partner as if married. Child marriage affects both girls and boys, but it affects girls disproportionately, especially in South Asia.

Adolescence is the stage when someone reaches sexual maturity while he/she is still dependent upon his/her parents for shelter and support. Early marriage is a common phenomena in Pakistan resulting in teenage pregnancy.

Teenagers may be physically ready to have sexual relationships, though often they do not have the psychological and mental maturity to handle the responsibilities and consequences.

The second major contemporary issue involved in teenage sexual behaviour is teenage pregnancy. Although teenagers are physically ready to be parents, they do not have the financial means, nor the psychological maturity, to be responsible parents. Unwanted pregnancies often disrupt family life, and create a major obstacle in a teenagers' life. This is especially so when teenage girls bear the burden of caring for the child. In consequence, their children do not receive adequate care.

3. Alcoholism

While alcoholism is generally recognized as a problem, it is not as widely recognized as a family problem. In reality, it is one of the major family problems. The consequences reach far beyond the alcoholic to the spouse, children, and others. Some of the debilitating effects of alcoholism are job loss, alienation of friends, abandonment by family, imprisonment, institutionalization, and even death.

Alcoholism is a serious family problem. In most instances, it results in child abuse and spouse beating. When one parent is alcoholic, the lives of all members of the family are seriously affected. Spouse abuse and beating, financial difficulty, and emotional conflicts associated with alcoholism, all contribute to the long and silent suffering of the spouse.

The children of alcoholics are also affected in many ways. The children of mothers who drink heavily during pregnancy can be born with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome. Children with this syndrome tend to have a higher risk of infant mortality, are born prematurely, grow up with delayed motor development, disfigurement, immature physical development, hyperactivity, and learning problems. In addition, Alcohol Syndrome is the third largest cause of mental retardation. Physical problems may also occur when the father is alcoholic, although the evidence may be indirect and more subtle.

Alcoholism also affects the children's emotional development. Those reared in alcoholic families are often neglected, abused, and lack proper care and interaction with their parents. The alcoholic family is often volatile, repressive or inconsistent. One of the most basic needs of children, the need for security, is often unsatisfied. An inadequate sense of security, in turn, diminishes the quality of the children's interactions and personal relationships with others.

4. Drug Abuse

What may have appeared a distant problem - drug abuse - is now a painful reality in African societies. Abuse of drugs takes place in school premises, in the playground outside school hours, and even in the home. Commonly abused drugs include Indian hemp and, increasingly, hard drugs like Mandrax and cocaine.

The effects of drugs can be observed in such things as petty thieving among the young, disobedience, violent individual and group behaviour, sustained delinquency leading to probation, as well as an inability to concentrate on studies. Drug abuse also leads to the many physical and emotional problems faced by families with an alcoholic member.

As a social worker, you will have to recognize the problems and be able to find solutions to them within your school system.

5. Domestic Violence

Domestic violence often accompanies alcoholism in the family. Domestic violence and spouse beating can be instigated by either the husband or the wife. However, the wife is often the victim of the violence. Beaten wives carry a variety of psychological scars, including an extremely low self-image, a lack of self-confidence and security, a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, and a feeling of guilt that they provoked the alcoholic, and deserved the punishment. Children from violent families suffer many emotional traumas.

Domestic violence happens more often when there are strong gender stereotypes, and unequal status, between men and women. In societies where men are supposed to 'rule' and to 'keep their wives in order' through physical means, there are serious consequences, such as the creation of dysfunctional families.

As social workers, we need to be sensitive to the women and children. We need to guard against our own gender biases. We need to be cognizant of the unjust social and environmental forces that make women and children victims of the system. Women's rights are human rights.

6. Death, Divorce and Separation in the Family

Death of a loved one in the family creates deep emotional grief. It is hard for adults to accept the loss of a spouse through death. The financial hardship, that often follows the loss of the wage earner in the family, can be devastating for the surviving spouse.

For children, the death of a parent is even more traumatic, as their understanding of death is very limited. They are often confused by the reasons for death, and experience a period of depression. Even though they often cannot put their sorrow into

words, they still have a profound sense of loss. They feel insecure and fearful. Their school performance usually suffers for a year or more after the death of a parent. Many parents prefer not to mention the dead parent in the presence of the child in order to spare the child sorrow. However, the child needs to have a chance to talk about his/her loss, and to express its grief and confusion. This is the time when the child needs a lot of support, love and communication, in order to deal with death.

Divorce is the dissolution of a marriage. It is the disintegration of a legally recognized state of marriage. Separation is when a couple formally live apart without going through the legal procedure of divorce. Divorce and separation signal the death of a family relationship, and therefore, create much emotional trauma in the family similar to that of the death of a spouse. Perhaps divorce and separation are actually more difficult than widowhood, as the couple, who harbour emotional resentment towards each other, may still have to face each other when dealing with their children and making financial settlements.

Studies show that children view the separation and divorce of their parents as extraordinarily stressful. Fewer than 10 per cent were relieved by a divorce decision, despite considerable exposure to intense marital conflict or physical

violence between their parents. The stress a child suffers during, and after the divorce, ranks closely to the trauma of losing a parent through death.

Typically, children may be flooded with feelings they cannot fully understand or talk about. These include anger at being caught in a situation they cannot change, guilt from the feeling they may have somehow contributed to the break-up, and sadness over the loss of a parent who no longer lives with the family.

In school, a child's behaviour and ability to achieve is affected if the child is under great stress - whatever the cause. The death of a parent, or the divorce of parents, may result in inattention, absent-mindedness, behavioural problems, and withdrawals from class activities.

Divorce and separation break the family apart, and result in single families, stepfamilies, and sometimes, homeless children.

7. Homelessness

War, poverty, unwanted pregnancy, and family break-up, are common causes of child abandonment. In many developing countries, children as young as six or seven years old roam the streets, forming their own gangs, living on begging, stealing and scraping from rubbish dumps, because their families do not want them.

In the urban centres of many developed countries, a similar phenomenon has appeared in recent years. Homeless people are everywhere, young and old alike. They loiter in the streets, sleep on pavements, in train stations or in parks. They have no place to go, nobody to turn to, no job to do, and no money. For adults, the main causes of homelessness are unemployment, alcoholism, mental problems, poverty, old age or illness. Homelessness usually leads to prostitution, early marriages, or loveless affairs in a homeless person's bid to obtain love and affection.

In many parts of the world, war and political turmoil, bloody tribal conflicts and ethnic hostilities, have pushed millions out of their traditional homelands. They are homeless refugees who live marginally on the courtesy of the host countries. However, most are less lucky. They have not only lost their homes but their families as well. The brutal experience of war and the harsh reality of living as a refugee make these people desperately in need of social services.

8. Poverty

Have you ever been without money? How did you feel? Nothing makes a man more humble and unsure of himself as poverty. It wrecks personal happiness and interpersonal relationships.

When a family is poor it means that basic necessities and other needs cannot be provided. Often a poor person seeks refuge in alcohol, which only compounds the problem.

As a social worker you have to work with families to improve their economic conditions. You can find information on how to go about this in Unit 3 of this module, and in the Guidance module.

9. The Uprooted Family

Are you living in the community in which you were born and raised? A number of families, for various reasons, need to move and resettle. This means leaving their community, their relatives and friends and, often, it also requires changing outlooks or ways of doing things. Effective adjustment requires a new set of behaviour, manners and beliefs. An example of uprooted families are refugees.