

# village view

by Andrea Leonard

In recent weeks, the local radio and daily newspapers brought us a tragic story of a little boy who died from a blow or blows to his small body. Found guilty of manslaughter, his stepfather was sentenced to a long prison term.

An editorial in the paper quotes Judge McLaughlin as having said he wanted to "put him away at least until the other children in the family mature enough to run away."

The editorial continues to quote the judge, "This is a dastardly, inexplicable, unforgiveable act," and follows up with recommendations to report child abuse and neglect to the authorities.

Further, it analyses reasons for child batterings, suggesting parental frustration as a cause, and declaring, "Social workers blame the economy, unemployment, drugs or alcohol for the steep rise in the number of instances of child abuse."

For the past fifteen years I've been closely affiliated with the agency within the Commonwealth that deals most directly with child abuse and neglect, Children's Protective Services (MSPCC).

Those initials stand for Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children; the initials CPS also refer to the agency, and are used throughout the state to identify it.

While CPS is a private agency supported by your contributions to the Cape Cod United Fund, and not a part of the Department of Public Welfare, the agency is under contract to the state to provide protective services to children. Since 1969, I've been a staff member at the Cape Cod office of CPS.

Every day concerned people from all over Cape Cod and the islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket telephone our office to report a child or children in one family or another who need help.

The reports receive no publicity because the innocent must be protected; everyone is presumed innocent until proven guilty. Therefore the work of the agency is carried on, for the most part, if not in the dark, at least in a shadow of confidentiality.

Three social workers and one executive comprise the professional staff of the District. There is one clerical employee: me.

As a staff member, and as a past-president of the Board of Directors (in which capacity I served prior to being employed), I'd like to respond to that editorial.

To begin with, I do not presume to question Judge McLaughlin's wisdom in sentencing this man to a long prison term. I do, however, wonder that the judge would describe the child-battering syndrome as inexplicable.

Over and over again, case records reveal that abusive parents were, themselves, abused children. A man who grows up to beat his children is a man who was beaten as a child. A child who is abused by its mother may — without guidance or counseling — become an abusive parent.

Surely judges are aware of this; surely the long trail of generation after generation of abuse — a trail that's been delineated in the files of CPS since the agency was chartered in the Commonwealth ninety-nine years ago and a trail that's been publicized repeatedly — has not escaped the notice of the judiciary of our courts.

There's nothing inexplicable about child abuse. In our society it's not only tolerated, it's applauded in many instances.

There is, you see, a fine line between physical abuse and appropriate discipline. While none of us condones killing a child, many do believe the old adage, "Spare the rod, spoil the child." A parent who was abused when he was a child has no basis for differentiating between discipline and abuse.

And yes, social workers agree frustrations do lead to loss of temper and to striking out at a child who may happen to cry at the wrong time. And yes, social workers do blame the economy, unemployment, and financial burdens and recognize these lead to frustration, not only in child-abusers, but in all of us.

And yes, social workers do blame excessive use of

alcohol and other drugs for behavior that is socially unacceptable, not only in child abusers, but in all of us.

Social workers harbor no ill-will toward their clients even those who may be beating their children. They know such parents honestly love their children, just as you love yours, and can learn alternatives to abusing their youngsters.

Through counseling with parents and helping them learn to give their children appropriate care and discipline, social workers enable abusive parents to find other ways to meet problems and handle frustrations, and through this teaching prevent the development of another generation of child-abusers.

Fathers and mothers who discipline their children by whipping them with belts, coat hangers, electric cords, wooden spoons, yard sticks, or hairbrushes are not necessarily criminals, but they are child-beaters. If a child has marks or bruises on his body — face, legs, arms, bottom — after being punished, he's been physically abused.

Parents who raise welts on their kids need help in learning how better to handle their own angers as well as to meet the need their children have for attention, recognition and affection, in addition to firm consistent discipline that's neither excessively severe nor physically or emotionally damaging to the child.

Toleration of child abuse is, unfortunately, fairly common in our society. Following the trial and conviction of the step-father of the little boy who died as a result of having been beaten, the CPS telephone rang almost constantly for the first few days. Reports of child abuse and neglect came pouring into our office.

They ranged from mild neglect to serious abuse; the office staff was hard put to keep abreast of its current caseload of seventy plus families, and to absorb the new referrals.

The calls will taper off in less than a week, however; we know from past experience that people have a high tolerance to the suffering child, and will act only if nudged by publicity, such as the recent trial, or by strong emotion aroused, perhaps, by witnessing a child being beaten.

No matter how many reports of child abuse we receive, each will be investigated; no matter how many reports of child neglect come in, each will be evaluated.

Not every case of alleged neglect will warrant intervention; three social workers covering all of Barnstable County and the islands cannot adequately fill the need. Only the most serious situations, then, will be provided long-term service.

Each referral, however, will be given attention and steps will be taken to protect every child judged to be in danger. Why did we not provide protection for this child? We never heard of him until it was too late.

Each of us has a duty to report instances of child abuse or neglect. Your spouse, brother, sister, son or daughter may be victimizing a child, or it may be a friend or neighbor who needs help.

Reports come from every imaginable source; sometimes from the children themselves — sometimes even from the abusing parent — a parent who says, "Please help me. I've just spanked my baby and I know he's too young to know why I did it. I'm afraid of my own anger, and that I might hurt my child."

Such a parent isn't treated like a criminal when he calls CPS for help. A social worker doesn't consider that parent "bad"; rather, he — or she — is seen as someone who needs and is worthy of receiving the assistance requested.

Please do report child abuse and child neglect. Don't let the memory of that child who died fade and be forgotten. If you know a family that needs help and understanding, please pick up the phone and dial 775-0275. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; there's an answering service if the office is closed.

A child is utterly defenseless when attacked by an angry parent. There is no one else a child can look to for protection. The child is the helpless victim, the ever-present victim. There is nowhere the child can go to escape.