

Suffer the little children

In the first five months of this year alone, 273 abused and neglected children have been attended to at the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital. The hospital has described this as the tip of the iceberg as the country observes Child Protection Week.

It said that over the past 25 years it had seen an increase in the numbers and severity of child abuse and neglect cases at the facility. From January until the end of May, it reported 88 cases of physical abuse, 66 of neglect, 45 of sexual abuse, six of abandonment, 11 of children at risk, 18 incidents of dog bites, 17 gunshot injuries and 22 burns.

According to the Optimus National Prevalence Study, an estimated 42% of South Africa's children have experienced some form of maltreatment and 82% have either experienced or witnessed some form of victimisation. One in three children have experienced physical or sexual abuse, one in four emotional abuse and one in five neglect.

The hospital said there was a near 50% split between boys and girls presenting with abuse, violence and neglect. Hospital spokesperson Dwayne Evans said: "The effects of violence, neglect and abuse against children can last a lifetime. Girls tend to internalise the violence and experience depression and anxiety, which increases their risk of further victimisation, while boys externalise their experience through increased risk-taking and aggressive behaviour."

Lori Lake, communications and education specialist at the Children's Institute at UCT, said there was concern about the increasing numbers and severity of child abuse and violence that the hospital was encountering.

"We want to encourage people to take action... to have the courage to look more closely, and at the stories children are telling us, and intervene before things get out of hand. If you see a woman being abused, you should also look at her kids. For women suffering with depression, we need to make sure they are able to access treatment and support."

The director at child protection organisation Molo Songololo, Patrick Solomons, said last year the organisation worked with 423 children, most of them between 10 and 17. Of these cases, 12% were sexual exploitation cases, he said. "This is when a child has been groomed and coerced into sexually exploitative situations. We find the victim is expected to provide sex when he/she is given a reward," said Solomons. The organisation has found that during community engagement, incidences of sexual exploitation were under-reported. "Often we find people blame the teenagers, call them 'ougat', 'slut', say they drink. But we never put the focus on who is allowing the children to hang out in bad places, who is giving them money to buy alcohol and for what purpose," Solomons said.

Provincial social development spokesperson Joshua Chigome said all departments involved in child safety were working together to combat the unacceptably high levels of child abuse in the Western Cape. Health services had joined forces with police, community safety, social services and NGOs, he said. "The Department believes that social workers also have an essential role to play in helping the child to heal after the abuse. The social worker will offer education, information and counselling. If the social worker believes the child is at risk of further abuse when discharged from a health facility and is in need of urgent protection, they can issue a Form 4 detention order to remove the child to a place of safety," Chigome said. If a child's mental state required more specialist/psychiatric interventions, the child would be referred to the appropriate health facility.

People can report suspected child abuse or neglect to Childline via their National Crisis line at 08 000 55 555 or Childline Western Cape at 021 762 8198 or 021 461 1114.

Rape Crisis can be contacted at 021 447 1467. Crime Stop can be contacted at 08600 10111 or SMS Crime Line at 32211 and the domestic violence Helpline at 0800 150 150.