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**SPEECH BY MR ABDULLAH TARMUGI,
ACTING MINISTER FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT,
AT THE LAUNCH OF THE CHILD ABUSE PUBLIC AWARENESS POSTER
AT THE ATRIUM OF JUNCTION 8
ON SATURDAY, 15 OCTOBER 1994 AT 2.00 PM**

I am very happy and honoured to join you this afternoon for the launch of Singapore Children Society's Child Abuse Public Awareness Poster.

The contribution of CANPSC

The Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Standing Committee (CANPSC) has come a long way since it was formed in 1988. In the initial years, CANPSC focused mainly on training of staff and workshops for social workers and volunteers. The Child Abuse Manual for Social Workers completed two years ago, the pamphlet for medical professionals completed last year and a similar one for teaching professionals done this year are examples of the excellent work done by the Committee.

This year, in addition to the seventh child abuse workshop and public lecture, CANPSC is also focusing on public education, through posters and a play put up by Act Three.

I commend CANPSC for its invaluable contribution towards better public understanding on child abuse and neglect.

The child abuse situation in Singapore

The number of alleged child abuse cases reported to the Ministry of Community Development (MCD) has declined from 217 in 1988 to 112 last year.

While the number of cases has declined, child abuse remains a source of serious concern to my Ministry. There is no excuse for wilful abuse or neglect of children. Firstly, children are vulnerable and are not in a position to protect themselves. Secondly, apart from physical scars, child abuse leaves behind mental scars, which often linger on and affect the abused later on in life in one way or another.

Of the 112 cases reported last year, 32 or about a third were confirmed abuse cases. Fifty-three or about half were classified as cases where child discipline and management went out of control. The remaining 27 cases turned out to be false complaints. About three quarters of child abusers were members of the immediate or extended family. This pattern is fairly representative of the breakdown of reported cases over the years.

Where there is wilful abuse or neglect, MCD will not hesitate to prosecute the abuser. But these form only a minority of the cases reported. The number brought to Court has averaged less than 10 over the past few years.

For the majority of cases, more often than not, the root cause is a dysfunctional family, beset with problems such as marital disputes, unwanted pregnancies, financial difficulties or depression. Child abuse and neglect is often the manifestation of these family circumstances rather than of wilful intent to hurt the child.

Strengthening the family

Strengthening the family is therefore our best long term insurance against problems like child abuse. Society and Government can never take over the role of parents. Society must never send a message that it is alright for parents, no matter how difficult their circumstances, to abdicate their responsibility as mothers and fathers. Society's role must be to help them become better parents.

MCD has over the years produced several resource materials to help parents. The materials produced include pamphlets, the handbook on "Parenting Today" and videos on topics such as "Communicating with your child", "Helping your child cope with stress", "Disciplining your child" and "Parenting your teenager". Talks are held every month by various organizations on various aspects of parenting under the Family Life and Parent Education programme coordinated by MCD.

But often, with dysfunctional families and families at risk, there is no substitute for counselling and personal contact. The resource materials can only supplement the efforts of social workers and volunteers. With the help of civic and voluntary organizations like the Singapore Children's Society, we can reach out to more parents and help them to improve their family life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to take this opportunity to express MCD's sincere appreciation for all the work that the Children's Society has done over the years to help the less fortunate children in our midst. I wish you even greater success.

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