

# NEGLECT OF DUTY

*For every child who is killed in New Zealand by their parent or caregiver, there is almost certainly another adult who knew what was going on but did nothing. Lee-Anne Duncan warns, don't let that adult be you*

Pam Hayes stands at a lectern amid the wood-panelled formality of Parliament's Grand Hall. She is tall, attractive and immaculately dressed. In front of her sit a couple of hundred invited guests: CEOs and managers from the social services sector, MPs, philanthropists, a few captains of industry, invited to the launch of a new book, *Hidden in Front of Us*, which I co-wrote.

In her calm, measured voice she is revealing the details of her upbringing – growing up just outside a small North Island town, one of five siblings, all of whom were almost daily viciously beaten and belittled by their white middle-class mother, without the apparent knowledge of their father.

"Growing up, I knew fear more than any other emotion," she says.

"I never knew what my mother was going

to do from one minute to the next."

But the most shocking is yet to come. "When my mother died," Pam continues, "I went to her funeral. I didn't want to go, but I did. After the service, several of my parents' friends came up to me and said they knew what had been happening to my brother and sisters and me. They knew. They knew but they did nothing. And then they said, 'But haven't you turned out well in spite of it.'" Her voice is still measured, but now there's fury in it – and disgust.

In her mid-50s, Pam has indeed turned out well, no thanks to any of the adults who failed to protect her as a child. She is one of 24 child abuse survivors who tell of growing up in terror and helplessness through *Hidden in Front of Us*. The book is produced by the charitable trust Child Matters (formerly CPS), which specialises in child

protection education and provides programmes throughout New Zealand that instruct, inspire and support adults to protect children.

Almost every day there is some sort of media report that shines the light on our woeful child abuse record. That may be a crime story about another parent who's put their child in hospital (one child under two is hospitalised by their caregiver every five days) or killed them (one every 23 days in 2009). Or it might be yet another international report confirming our shameful ranking – New Zealand is fourth on the list of OECD countries for the most child deaths by maltreatment.

But the children whose sad stories make the headlines are only a fraction of the whole picture. For every abused child who is hospitalised or killed, experts can only guess at how many more live with such treatment every day. Dozens? Probably hundreds.

While all 24 stories in *Hidden in Front of Us* are different, each has a shocking similarity: in every case, at least one adult knew – or surely must have known – what was happening to that child, and in almost every case those adults did nothing to help. Those adults included teachers, doctors, counsellors, police – people whose job it is to intervene.

"Adults who, thankfully, were not abused as children have no idea what it's like," says Anthea Simcock, CEO of Child Matters and the book's co-author.

"Using the experiences of survivors, through *Hidden in Front of Us* I wanted to make adults understand how petrified these children are and how powerless they are to stop the abuse."

Anthea continues, "We estimate as many as 80% of abused children never overtly disclose what is happening to them. They're too afraid. That's why it's up to us to be able to read the signs, both on their bodies and in their behaviour, and know what to do when a child is in danger."

True, the signs of abuse can be nebulous and confusing: Is that bruise on her inner thigh from falling off her bike, or is it from being sexually abused? Is his black eye really from walking into a door, or is it from a fist in the face? Is that extremely quiet/misbehaving child just a little angel/violent demon or is ▶

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## INDICATORS OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Watch out for clusters of signs. It is vital to remember that any one of these signs could well be the result of something other than abuse.

### PHYSICAL SIGNS:

- Bruises or welts on fleshy areas, including throat, genitals, torso, buttocks, back
- An imprint of what was used, such as a cord or belt, hand/teeth marks, cigarette burns
- Bruises or cuts at different stages of healing
- Fractures or head injuries (especially in non-mobile children)
- Dislocations, particularly of hips or shoulders
- Bloody, sore genitals, STIs indicating sexual abuse
- Wearing clothes inappropriate to weather (covering up in summer, not enough clothing in winter)
- Malnourished and undersized.

### BEHAVIOURAL SIGNS:

Watch out for changes in behaviour.

- Child can't explain how injuries happened, or explanations are inconsistent
- Is wary of adults or a particular person
- Is extremely aggressive or extremely withdrawn (especially if this behaviour is new)
- Indiscriminately seeks affection and goes readily to strangers for nurturing
- Is extremely compliant and eager to please
- Regresses, such as starts to wet the bed
- Imitates negative behaviour or language while playing
- Runs away from home or is afraid to go home
- Takes unnecessary risks
- Talks about abusive situations
- Has poor self-esteem, which may come out during drawing or play
- May be violent to other children or animals
- Age-inappropriate sexual play
- Sophisticated or unusual sexual knowledge
- Says things such as 'I've got a secret' or 'I don't like Uncle'.

there something more serious behind that behaviour?

"The signs are all pieces of a puzzle, and you can't take one part of it and decide, 'Yes, it's abuse'. You have to look at clusters of signs; any physical evidence, along with the behaviour of the child – especially if it's changed – and also the behaviour of the parent," Anthea says.

"And if you aren't sure, ask someone else. One of our key messages is 'Never Act Alone'.

If you aren't sure, talk about it with someone."

Although most children will never openly ask for help, some of the people who were interviewed for *Hidden in Front of Us* managed to bury their anxiety. In each case, they were turned down.

"I can't get involved," said Jodi Vaughan's Brownie leader.

"Don't tell lies about a good man," said Katz's teacher, and phoned her mother.

"I can't help you. I'm here to ask your dad for money," said the aunt of 'JP'.

However, most of the 24 showed in their behaviour that they needed help. Some blatantly stole, others were regularly truant from school, they cried, they wet the bed, they self-harmed, they were antisocial or their fear kept them from acting like other children.

There are many reasons adults don't step in, says Anthea. "They may not be certain they're right, they may worry they will make it worse or they're afraid of being hurt themselves. Often they simply don't know what to do.

"It's also very easy to think, 'Oh, well, if I've noticed then someone else will have too, and that person will be taking action. Surely the child's teacher has noticed'. But the fact is New Zealand makes no requirement of its teachers, doctors, nurses etc, to undergo mandatory training around child abuse. That's why it's up to all of us to know, to notice and to act," she adds.

Anthea says time after time we see examples of adults who know about or suspect maltreatment and do nothing, such as in the case of Rotorua toddler Nia Glassie, who was abused until she died.

"Her family must have known, and her neighbours must have known." They have said they saw clues.

"We live in a society that doesn't want to interfere; we don't want to be a 'sticky beak'. Well, the message we got from all our survivors was that the child wants you to be a sticky beak. As one of the women in our book says, 'There's no virtue in being a bystander'."

Anthea says the book shows that each and every adult can make a huge difference in the lives of children. Sometimes even small gestures can help; a smile or kind word, for example, to show a child they are worth caring about, despite what their abuser has told them.

"But the bottom line is, if any of us suspects a child is in danger, we must do something. To do nothing is not an option," she says.

And if we ever did need another incentive, there's a huge financial one. An Informetrics report, released last year by Every Child Counts – a coalition of child welfare-focused non-government agencies – showed child abuse and neglect costs New Zealand around \$2 billion each year. Those costs include healthcare, welfare and justice services, special education and counselling services, as well as the cost of crime and the survivors' lost productivity. Those are costs we all pay for as a community.

The way forward, the book proposes, is to talk about child abuse until it becomes

socially unacceptable to mistreat children in any way, socially acceptable to ask for help, and socially acceptable – or essential – to intervene.

"We will get there and we will change these attitudes," says Pam Hayes. "In a few years' time society will say, 'People used to smack and beat their kids? Really?' It takes courage to start doing something that's right instead of hiding behind the habit of something that's wrong. It's going to take a long time, but we will get there. We need to. We have to." **N**

For further information about *Hidden in Front of Us*, visit [www.hiddeninfrontofus.ning.com](http://www.hiddeninfrontofus.ning.com). To find out more about *Child Matters*, go to [www.childmatters.org.nz](http://www.childmatters.org.nz).

## WHAT CAN I DO? STEP UP, STEP OUT, SPEAK OUT

If you are worried a child is being hurt or neglected, you can help. Do not assume someone else already is. Trust your instincts: Don't ask yourself, 'What if I'm wrong?' Ask yourself, 'What if I'm right?'

### STEP UP – DO SOMETHING PERSONALLY

**Listen:** Providing a listening ear to a stressed, unwell or not-coping parent may be the catalyst for that person to start a new and safer way of parenting. Listen to the child too – let them know that violence is not okay and that they can safely talk to you about anything.

**Offer practical help:** An offer of childminding may give a stressed parent some much-needed time out that may make them happier and better able to cope.

**Offer information:** Parenting ideas, budgeting tips or advice on the help available in the community can make a difference. Learn to recognise the signs: Attend a workshop or a training course. Professionals involved with children should make it a priority to continually maintain and refresh their child protection knowledge, such as those provided by Child Matters.

**Talk it over with an experienced person:** Never act alone. If you don't feel confident in providing the right kind of help, or you aren't sure your concern is serious, seek the advice of someone who has the right skills, training and experience. Be aware, however, that it is not mandatory in New Zealand for education or health professionals to attend any training in child protection.

If you don't have access to someone who is experienced, call 0508 326 459 (0508 FAMILY). Anyone can call Child, Youth and Family anonymously to talk over their concerns before

deciding what to do next. To learn more about the Department of Child, Youth and Family go to [www.cyfgovt.nz](http://www.cyfgovt.nz).

### STEP OUT – IF THE PERSONAL TOUCH ISN'T ENOUGH, LOOK FOR COMMUNITY SUPPORT

**Learn about what agencies can help:** By learning about the assistance available in the community and how to access that help you can provide relevant information. Government agencies (such as Child, Youth and Family, Winz, and the Family Services directory at: <http://www.familyservices.govt.nz/directory>) and non-government agencies (such as Plunket, Barnardos, Open Home Foundation, Family Works, Family Start) can help.

**Connect the family with local agencies:** A family living with stress and violence may not be in a position to seek out the help they need. They rely on others to make the connection and introduction.

### SPEAK OUT – REPORT YOUR CONCERNS

If you don't have a relationship with the family, want to remain anonymous or don't feel you have the skills to address the situation, pick up the telephone. If you are concerned about the safety of a child, it is always best to report those concerns. If you suspect a child is at serious risk, or a crime against a child has been committed, this must be reported.

**Call Child, Youth and Family:** For further advice, or to make a report of concern, call 0508 326 459 (0508 FAMILY).

**Call the police:** Most police regions now have specialised child abuse teams. You can call your local station and ask to speak to one of the team members or the duty sergeant.

**Call 111:** If you believe a child is in immediate and serious danger, act immediately – call the police on 111.

**Whatever you do, do something. You may be the person to save that child's life.**