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Kids don't get holiday from abuse

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One down, one to go.

Along with the joy and celebration during Christmas and New Year's comes a great deal of stress.

But what is difficult for adults may be dangerous for children.

The risk of child abuse increases over the holiday season because parents and caregivers are more likely to snap, according to child-abuse prevention advocates.

"Anything that increases the stress level increases the chance for abuse or neglect," says Kevin Kirkpatrick, a spokesman for Chicago-based Prevent Child Abuse America.

Many of the factors that put children at risk intensify this time of year. Adults, especially single parents, face increasing levels of social isolation and financial pressure, worsened by an anemic economy. Alcohol and drug abuse rises during holidays.

School-age children are at home on vacation, adding another responsibility for working parents to juggle.

The result is an incendiary cocktail of emotions that prompts some parents to lash out in the only way they know how.

"I grew up getting a whipping," says Latoya, 26, a single parent in Chicago with a 7-year-old.

"I was scared I would hurt my son."

The Healthy Families Illinois program taught Latoya ways to discipline her child without physically or verbally abusing him.

"I thought I knew how to be a parent, but I didn't," says the young mother.

That's the typical case, says Lisa Cashion of Prevent Child Abuse America.

"It's not the out-of-control maniacal parent who usually abuses a child. It's more often the parent with a full plate who just loses it a little bit," Cashion says.

And who isn't vulnerable to stress? A walk through any department store during the post-Christmas sales will reveal fidgety children and irritable parents.

The key is to learn different ways of dealing with it.

"I parented the way I was raised," says Denise, 44, who lives in Springfield and has two children, ages 21 and 15.

"I started yelling and hitting, but I knew there was a better way."

Denise participated in a self-help group, earned a college degree and now works in child abuse prevention.

"People love their kids, but they don't know how to handle their behavior. When they try to discipline them, it turns into abuse," she says.

Unfortunately, most high-profile cases of abuse are extreme. The Cook County public guardian has launched a new section on its Web site, www.publicguardian.org, to expose the stories of children abused while in state care.

But meanwhile, the majority of cases show a much thinner line between abusive and non-abusive parents. Those cases often are not reported.

The U.S. surgeon general's office called child abuse a crisis more than 15 years ago. Each year, more than 825,000 children experience serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or neglect.

Illinois' widening budget gap, estimated at \$500 million this year, is expected to mean cuts in services. Gov.-elect Rod Blagojevich will have tough choices to make, but he needs to protect children who can't protect themselves by supporting programs that intervene long before a call to authorities is ever placed.

Prevention is difficult to fund politically because its success is hard to quantify and prove to legislators--the lack of data may mean the success of the program.

But try explaining that in a grant proposal. Or to an abused child.

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