



Child abuse: A socio-historical perspective

By Sebastian van As. 1st ed. Durban: Reach Publishers, 2023. ISBN 978-1-77636-607-1

This illustrated 293-page paperback with 354 references and 85 illustration credits is written by a retired world authority on child abuse – Emeritus Prof. (UCT) Sebastian van As, who headed the Paediatric Trauma Unit at a leading African children's hospital for over 20 years. If you ever wanted to know how big a problem child abuse is and wish to educate yourself on this emotive topic, read this book: it provides a fascinating exposé.

Van As sets out to position the global problem of child abuse from a clinician's perspective, using his vast experience and knowledge on the topic, as well as explaining

the history and evolution of the problem, from its hidden past and dark secrets to its starkness in all its forms in the modern-day arena. This is an emotive subject at any time, which unleashes huge emotional turmoil from within as the author painstakingly explains the details of the multiple different forms, using illustrative global or local events through the ages that may have influenced certain human/community behaviours linked with child abuse. Every area discussed is backed up by credible historical evidence, and strays into describing how seemingly 'innocent' adult actions have profound effects on the future direction of life-changing psychological stress on children with talent. This said, I believe that his main thrust in sharing his wealth of information is to raise global awareness without sensationalism, so that common prevention and protective strategies can emerge. He advocates strongly for an organised societal strategy for the creation of a safer place for all children. The concluding chapter is a necessary debrief that restores the soul after the candid detail of the extent of child abuse in the previous chapters, but importantly ends by making child safety everybody's business and responsibility: the solution rests with all of us.

The language used throughout can be easily understood without deep medical jargon, and should be of interest to the general public as well as physicians who work with children. The book begins and ends with an apt Nelson Mandela quotation. The closing one –

A better society will and must be measured by the happiness and welfare of our children, at once the most vulnerable citizens in any society and the greatest of our treasures.

Indeed.

Contents:

1. Introduction: Defining child abuse; Sensationalism in child abuse; A Darwinian approach to child abuse; Compassion fatigue; Acts of commission and omission.
2. A brief history of child abuse: Historical accounts of child abuse; A global perspective on child abuse.
3. Passive forms of child abuse: Acts of omission constituting child maltreatment: Introduction; Child neglect; Child abandonment; Medical care neglect.
4. Active forms of child abuse: Acts of commission constituting child abuse: Introduction; Corporal punishment; Physical child abuse; Child sexual abuse; Child labour; Torture and isolation; Wars and child soldier victimhood.
5. The dark side of pushing children to success: Child acting; Child prodigies; Child sports stars.
6. Examples of changing societal perspectives: Suffrage; Refugees; Animal rights.
7. Child violence prevention and the future of child care: WHO response; UNICEF: A child-centred approach; From children's rights to adult responsibilities.
8. Hope for the future: The decline of violence worldwide; Declining rates of child maltreatment.
9. Conclusions.

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