

ASK YOURSELF:

By Alicia Bayat
Voice Editor-in-Chief

You come home one day to find a little girl, thin, hair and clothes un-kept. She stands in your doorway fidgety, embarrassingly trying to hide the holes in her shoes. Her eyes look at you with a hunger that is only matched by her appetite. It's obvious she hasn't eaten. She looks at you with her tear stained face, angry red marks on her cheeks, eyes filled with fear. She tells you she has been abused by her parent. "Please don't send me home. I'll do anything. I can't go home."

What would you do next? What should you do?

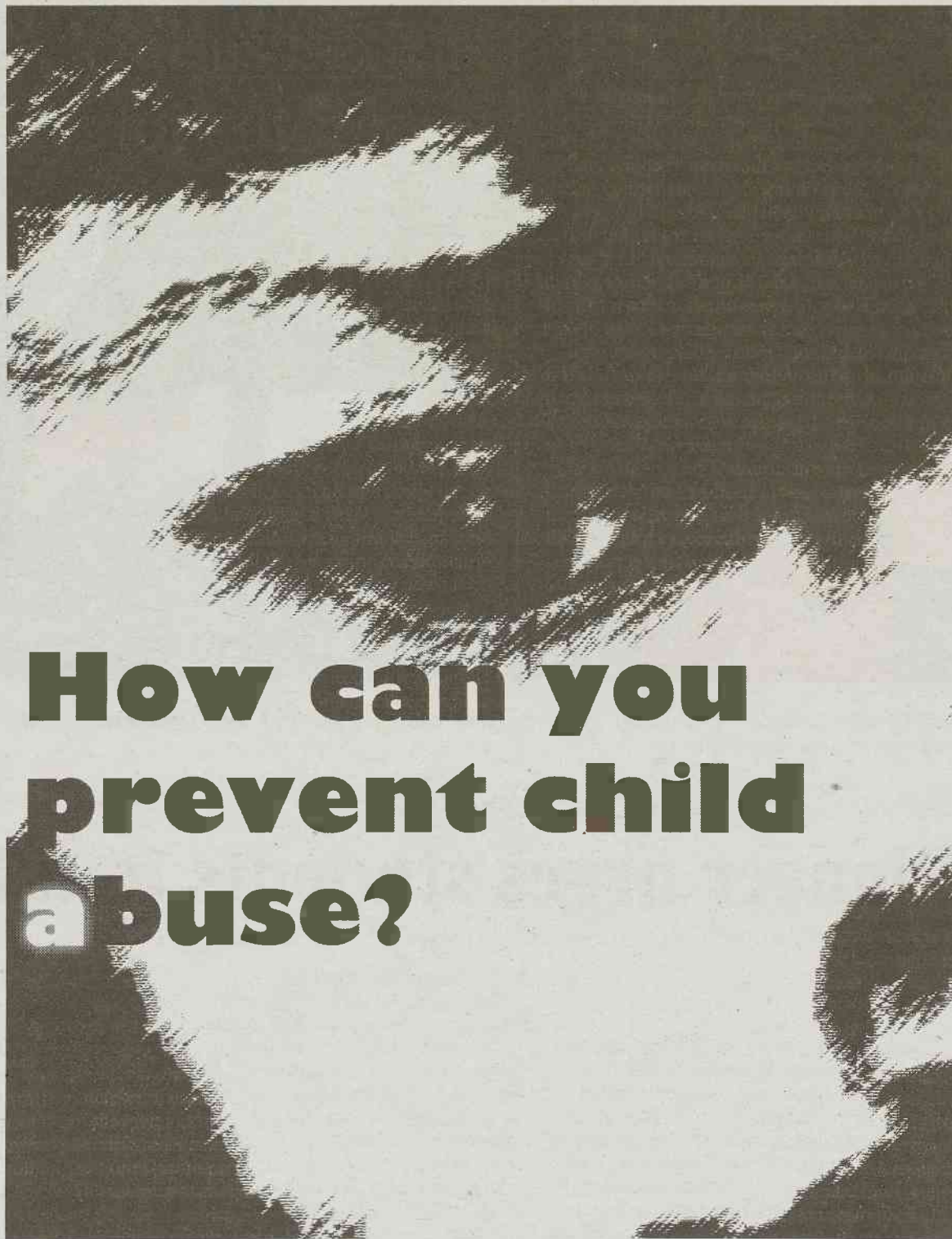
Almost five children die every day as a result of child abuse, according to the U.S. Department of Health Services. A report of child abuse is made every ten seconds.

There may be a "disconnect" in the system, when agencies have good intentions, but they are not in agreement with procedures. Could the system be set up to re-victimize children when they are labeled as "trouble makers" in schools and are repeatedly sent back by Department of Social Services (DSS) to their alleged abusers?

According to Fayetteville Police Department (FPD) victim advocate Theresa Curey, the process should be to report the incident to the police where referrals can be made to social workers, doctors if necessary or counseling services to "get to the bottom of what happened to the child."

One source at the Cumberland County Sheriff's Department (CCSD) agreed and indicated that the first call should always be to the Sheriff's Department. He stated that you put yourself at risk of being charged with kidnapping if you do not. However another source in the department said the best thing to do is call DSS. It is not mandatory to contact the police. The second source also said that you cannot get into trouble for reporting suspected child abuse or neglect. Neither source wanted to be identified for this story.

According to section I of federal law entitled Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 2003. "The problem of child abuse and neglect requires a comprehensive approach that integrates the work of social services, legal, health, mental health, education, and substance abuse agencies and community-based organizations...recognizes the need for properly trained staff with the qualifications needed to



How can you prevent child abuse?

carry out their protection duties... all elements of American society have a shared responsibility in responding to child abuse and neglect...."

"One thing I do is encourage students to report it," said Douglas Byrd Middle School principal David Edwards. "Sometimes students tell us and ask us to not say anything," said Mr. Edwards "We can't hold that information."

He said that holding that kind of information could be a liability. According to Mr. Edwards when a child runs away they are labeled a

"runner" steps are taken to ensure they don't become a "cutter." According to the Mayo Clinic a "cutter" is someone who deliberately inflicts self injury as an unhealthy way to deal with emotional pain.

According to Principal Edwards when they suspect or have a report of abuse for one of their students they contact DSS. A social worker opens a case and the school waits for instructions either to send the child back to the parents or hold them. He said DSS takes over and they are basically in charge at that point.

There are many factors that may play out before a child finds their way into the custody of Child Protective Services (CPS). Before this happens a child's credibility is established through the parents and the school system. If a child is labeled a "trouble maker" or "delinquent" they may no longer fall under the purview of CPS.

According to Ms. Curey, Fayetteville police officers go through extensive training. She said they train in collaboration with child advocacy centers, and CCSD.

"They are a multidisciplinary

team," according to Ms. Curey.

Could the security of children suffer when authority figures do not put their best interest ahead of liabilities and duties?

Reports are contradictory as to how reports are handled and by whom.

"Under North Carolina law every person is responsible for reporting," said Brenda Jackson, director of CPS.

Citizens are bound by law to report to CPS during business hours. After hours if you call CPS you will be directed to the CCSD, who will then contact a 24, hour CPS supervisor on call. That is the official process.

"Investigations are family centered," said Ms. Jackson.

"We approach it as not looking for guilt. What are the root causes? How do you help the family? We try to protect that emotional bond. It is a legal process. We cannot arbitrarily take children. It is also an intrusive process," said Ms. Jackson "Reunification is the goal. Parents have rights too."

Not all situations which involve children fall under the purview of CPS. "Juvenile delinquency is not our area of responsibility," said Ms. Jackson. Matters of child delinquency and runaways fall under the purview of the Department of Justice and should be reported to the FPD or CCSD.

Ms. Jackson stated that reports are made to CPS not the police. She also clarified that the police are a conduit that may be dispatched to protect the safety of the child or social worker if it is deemed necessary. "The priority is always the child."

The system itself is a long intricate process that is built to protect the accused as well as the victim.

According to Ms. Jackson her job is to help link families to services. She states that the system works well 99.9 percent of the time.

"I think it's a success at any level. We get well over 1000 calls a month. We have over 500 children in foster care," said Ms. Jackson "One case doesn't define the organization. We are held hostage to be able to defend ourselves. We're silent not because we choose to be but because we have to be."

"CPS is the first line of defense to protect the family and the child," said Ms. Jackson

What happens to that .1 percent that slips through? According to Child Help, a national nonprofit

Illustration by Jovian Turnbull

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