

# Suburban children not immune to violence

BY CAROLYN BARNETT-GOLDSTEIN  
SPECIAL WRITER

Current debate on the effects of TV and film violence on our children pales in comparison to the daily realities living in the hearts and minds of the world's children as they are enumerated at the recent international symposium, "A Voice for Children's Rights and Responsibilities."

Held at Wayne State University under the auspices of the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies and 40 other co-sponsors, including the Bloomfield Hills and Oakland Schools, approximately 250 participants comprised of doctors, lawyers, children's advocates, teachers, professors, social workers, administrators and students met to discuss the plight of children, their rights and needs, and what is being done on their behalf.

There is a global momentum to establish, permanently, the rights of children, which began with the adoption of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child in November 1989. According to lawyer and child advocate, Cynthia Price-Cohen, who served on the

convention writing committee, "As of this week 150 countries have ratified the convention, . . . and of the developed countries, only the United States has not yet signed, or is on the way to ratifying it."

The convention signifies recognition of children's rights as human rights. It legally binds the ratifying countries to the commitments of protection and rights of children. Ultimately, it can serve as an objective framework to which to refer for countries in violation of these rights.

## Suburban violence

Unfortunately, children in Detroit's suburbs are not exempt from peril.

Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Edward Sosnick on the panel "Child Rearing in the U.S.: Whose Responsibility?" explains that, after multiple custody cases, he "began to see the tremendous impact that the parents' behavior had on their kids. That they were putting the kids in the middle."

They (were) taking away their childhood."

With Oakland County's 3,000 divorce cases involving children

**'He (her father) makes me feel that I'm kinda not wanted, 'cause he's not paying. It's almost like he's saying, just stop. Just go over in a corner and die'**

## Child of divorce shown in film

filed each year, affecting 6,000 to 8,000 children, he was propelled to institute Start Making It Livable for Everyone (SMILE), currently available in 16 areas in Michigan. Its purpose "is to help parents create a nurturing environment", despite the pain of divorce, so that the "child will recover from the divorce, heal and feel good about himself, or herself, and their lives." Frequent contact with both parents is required to "make children feel secure and prevent them from thinking they've been rejected and abandoned."

Excerpts from the film Sosnick produced, entitled "Listen to the Children," let the audience hear the children directly relating their pain about their parent's abandonment, their depression and assumption of blame, their fears

and feelings of vulnerability, and the weight of responsibilities they carry resulting from parents' abdication of responsibilities.

One girl says, "He (her father) makes me feel that I'm kinda not wanted, 'cause he's not paying. It's almost like he's saying, just stop. Just go over in a corner and die."

## Talking with children

Unlike most judges, Sosnick makes it a point to talk to each child. Keynote speaker, George H. Russ, attorney for Gregory K. and Kimberly Mays, and father of nine, wants all children to have that chance. He's seeking "legal standing" for children in court.

"All standing is," he said, "the recognition that a person with something at stake in a legal proceeding has a right to be before the court to present to that court evidence, testimony, preferably through competent legal counsel, to make a persuasive argument and to try to convince the court of the correctness of their position."

With standing, children in cus-

tody disputes and long-term foster care would be able to speak for themselves.

In the forum on "Violence: The Health Epidemic of Our Time", psychiatrist and Southfield resident, Dr. Joseph Fischhoff confirmed that "unmodified aggression" can be recognized by three years of age. Early intervention can preclude the later development of a severe conduct disorder that can lead to delinquency. "But the problem is people don't want to recognize it early on." The best "protective factors are, obviously, having a mother and father all of the time, and to have very positive kinds of nurturing people, who know what to say — and consistently — (for the child), to hear, 'It's good to do this, or it's not good to do this.'"

## Learning structure

Children learn by imitation and need a constancy of a structure in the environment so they can learn how to trust who is taking care of them, and how to grow as adults, he said.

If denied these circumstances, the child is "highly vulnerable", without a sense of security and is left to take care of himself. Subsequently, a child will either "completely withdraw", or "lash out" to get whatever he wants, regardless of whom is "trampled over". If someone is not cared about, he/she won't learn how to care about another.

"But on a positive level", he continues, "once you are locked into being able to preserve some concern about people, and about things around you, it's an extremely protective factor against violence towards others and towards yourself."

The consequences of these deprivations are seen in the emergency rooms. In examples of abuse of children by adults, Dr. Norman Rosenberg recounts that babies are beaten and murdered when they are sometimes held up as a shield in an argument, ending up in their being shot or stabbed. "At the same time, these infants are used as weapons, themselves. They're grabbed by the heels and swung around like a baseball bat, or a club."

The occurrence of "sexual abuse is 20 percent of girls and 9 percent of boys in any given community at any given time," Dr. Howard Fischer reports. Whereas the number of insulin-dependent diabetic children before adulthood is one quarter of one percent. Three hundred thousand cases of sexual abuse in children 18 and under occur every year in contrast to 250,000 head injuries admitted to hospitals and 6,500 new childhood cancer patients.

Gunsight wounds, however, comprise the most casualties.

The above are just snapshots of the reality of our children's world.

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**November 13**  
Bloomfield Township Library  
1099 Lone Pine Road  
(southeast corner of Lone Pine and Telegraph)  
RSVP by November 8

**December 4**  
Livonia Civic Center Library  
32777 Five Mile Road  
(east of Farmington Road and the Civic Center)  
RSVP by November 29

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