

Participant Handouts

Domestic Violence and the Bahá'í Community

An Assembly Development Module Workshop

Domestic Violence and the Bahá'í Community

Overview for Participants

Purpose

- ★ To provide familiarity with what constitutes domestic violence
- ★ To explore guidance concerning violence and abuse
- ★ To clarify the difference in roles between the Assembly and the individual
- ★ To become familiar with appropriate courses of action open to individuals who experience or become aware of domestic violence within the Bahá'í community

This workshop, targeted to individuals and the Bahá'í community as a whole, explores guidance concerning violence and abuse. Participants will become familiar with appropriate courses of action open to individuals who experience or become aware of domestic violence within the Bahá'í community. A companion workshop, “Advanced Practice in Administering Justice - Focus on Domestic Violence,” is designed for use by Local Spiritual Assemblies.

What you will find inside your handouts:

- ★ Quotations and worksheets for the various segments of the workshop
- ★ An evaluation form to be filled out by you
- ★ An evaluation form to be filled out by the Assembly within two months after the workshop

If you would like to have information on additional workshops or other Assembly development resources, ask your Assembly Development Representative or contact the Office of Assembly Development at (847) 733-3490, by mail at 1233 Central Street, Evanston, IL 60201, or by e-mail at OAD@usbnc.org.

Note: If time is short for any exercise, focus on the quotations in **bold**.

The Call to a New State of Mind

“The evolution of local and national Bahá’í Assemblies at this time calls for a new state of mind on the part of their members as well as on the part of those who elect them. . . .”

“The evolution of local and national Bahá’í Assemblies at this time calls for a new state of mind on the part of their members as well as on the part of those who elect them, for the Bahá’í community is engaged in an immense historical process that is entering a critical stage. Bahá’u’lláh has given to the world institutions to operate in an Order designed to canalize* the forces of a new civilization.”

The Universal House of Justice, Ridván Message to the Bahá’ís of the World, 1996.

“. . . Spiritual Assemblies must rise to a new stage in the exercise of their responsibilities as channels of divine guidance, planners of the teaching work, developers of human resources, builders of communities, and loving shepherds of the multitudes. They can realize these prospects through increasing the ability of their members to take counsel together in accordance with the principles of the Faith and to consult with the friends under their jurisdiction, through fostering the spirit of service, through spontaneously collaborating with the Continental Counselors and their auxiliaries, and through cultivating their external relations. Particularly must the progress in the evolution of the institutions be manifest in the multiplication of localities in which the function of the Spiritual Assembly enhances the individual believer’s capacity to serve the Cause and fosters unified action. In sum, the maturity of the Spiritual Assembly must be measured not only by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning, but also by the continuity of the growth of Bahá’í membership, the effectiveness of the interaction between the Assembly and the members of its community, the quality of the spiritual and social life of the community, and the overall sense of vitality of a community in the process of dynamic, ever-advancing development.”

The Universal House of Justice, Ridván Message to the Bahá’ís of the World, 1996.

“The burgeoning influence of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation seemed . . . to have assumed the character of an onrushing wind blowing through the archaic structure of the old order, felling mighty pillars and clearing the ground for new conceptions of social organization. . . . Even the Community of the Most Great Name itself is experiencing the rigorous effects of this quickening wind as it ventilates the modes of thought of us all, renewing, clarifying, and amplifying our perspectives

*** Canalize:**
to channel into a particular direction;
provide an outlet for

The Call to a New State of Mind, continued

“Change is an evolutionary process. . . .”

as to the purpose of the Order of Bahá’u’lláh in the wake of humanity’s suffering and turmoil.”

The Universal House of Justice, Ridván message to the Bahá’ís of the World, 1992.

“Present-day conceptions of what is natural and appropriate in relationships – among human beings themselves, between human beings and nature, between the individual and society, and between the members of society and its institutions – reflect levels of understanding arrived at by the human race during earlier and less mature stages in its development. If humanity is indeed coming of age, if all the inhabitants of the planet constitute a single people, if justice is to be the ruling principle of social organization – then existing conceptions that were born out of ignorance of these emerging realities have to be recast.

“Movement in this direction has barely begun.”

Bahá’í International Community’s Office of Public Information, January 23, 1995, in *The Prosperity of Humankind*, section III.

“Change is an evolutionary process requiring patience with one’s self and others, loving education and the passage of time as the believers deepen their knowledge of the principles of the Faith, gradually discard long-held traditional attitudes and progressively conform their lives to the unifying teachings of the Cause.”

The Universal House of Justice, July 25, 1984, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986*, p. 634.

Guidance from the Universal House of Justice

Group Assignments:

Read the paragraphs indicated for your group then answer the questions on pp. 12-13.

- ★ **All groups:**
paragraph 2
- ★ **Group 1:**
paragraphs 3-8
- ★ **Group 2:**
paragraphs 9-15
- ★ **Group 3:**
paragraphs 16-22

A letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated January 24, 1993

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

Further to our letter of 14 November 1991, the Universal House of Justice has now completed its consideration of your letter of 21 September 1991, in which you raised a number of questions pertaining to violence and to the sexual abuse of women and children. We have been instructed to provide the following response to your questions. [1]

As you know, the principle of the oneness of mankind is described in the Bahá'í Writings as the pivot round which all the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve. It has widespread implications which affect and remold all dimensions of human activity. It calls for a fundamental change in the manner in which people relate to each other, and the eradication* of those age-old practices which deny the intrinsic* human right of every individual to be treated with consideration and respect. [2]

Within the family setting, the rights of all members must be respected. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated:

The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. The rights of the son, the father, the mother—none of them must be transgressed, none of them must be arbitrary. Just as the son has certain obligations to his father, the father, likewise, has certain obligations to his son. The mother, the sister and other members of the household have their certain prerogatives. All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved. . . . [3]

The use of force by the physically strong against the weak, as a means of imposing one's will and fulfilling one's desires, is a flagrant transgression of the Bahá'í Teachings. There can be no justification for anyone compelling another, through the use of force or through the threat of violence, to do that to which the other person is not inclined. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has written, "O ye lovers of God! In this, the cycle of Almighty God, violence and force, constraint and oppression, are one and all condemned." Let those who, driven by their passions or by their inability to exercise

*Eradicate:

to destroy utterly, exterminate; to pull up by the roots

*Intrinsic:

belonging to a thing by its very nature

Guidance from the Universal House of Justice, continued

“This principle [the equality of the sexes] . . . has profound implications in all aspects of human relations and must be an integral element of Bahá’í domestic and community life.”

discipline in the control of their anger, might be tempted to inflict violence on another human being, be mindful of the condemnation of such disgraceful behavior by the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. [4]

Among the signs of moral downfall in the declining social order are the high incidence of violence within the family, the increase in degrading and cruel treatment of spouses and children, and the spread of sexual abuse. It is essential that the members of the community of the Greatest Name take the utmost care not to be drawn into acceptance of such practices because of their prevalence. They must be ever mindful of their obligation to exemplify a new way of life distinguished by its respect for the dignity and rights of all people, by its exalted moral tone, and by its freedom from oppression and from all forms of abuse. [5]

Consultation has been ordained by Bahá’u’lláh as the means by which agreement is to be reached and a collective course of action defined. It is applicable to the marriage partners and within the family, and indeed, in all areas where believers participate in mutual decision-making. It requires all participants to express their opinions with absolute freedom and without apprehension that they will be censured or their views belittled; these prerequisites for success are unattainable if the fear of violence or abuse is present. [6]

A number of your questions pertain to the treatment of women, and are best considered in light of the principle of the equality of the sexes which is set forth in the Bahá’í Teachings. This principle is far more than the enunciation* of admirable ideals; it has profound implications in all aspects of human relations and must be an integral element of Bahá’í domestic and community life. The application of this principle gives rise to changes in habits and practices which have prevailed for many centuries. An example of this is found in the response provided on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a question whether the traditional practice whereby the man proposes marriage to the woman is altered by the Bahá’í Teachings to permit the woman to issue a marriage proposal to the man; the response is, “The Guardian wishes to state that there is absolute equality between the two, and that no distinction or preference is permitted. . . .” With the passage of time, during which Bahá’í men and women endeavor to apply more fully the principle of the equality of the sexes, will come a deeper

***Enunciate:**
to proclaim; to state
or declare definitely

Guidance from the Universal House of Justice, continued

“Bahá’í men have the opportunity to demonstrate to the world around them a new approach to the relationship between the sexes, where aggression and the use of force are eliminated and replaced by cooperation and consultation.”

understanding of the far-reaching ramifications of this vital principle. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has stated, “Until the reality of equality between man and woman is fully established and attained, the highest social development of mankind is not possible.” [7]

The Universal House of Justice has in recent years urged that encouragement be given to Bahá’í women and girls to participate in greater measure in the social, spiritual, and administrative activities of their communities, and has appealed to Bahá’í women to arise and demonstrate the importance of their role in all fields of service to the Faith. [8]

For a man to use force to impose his will on a woman is a serious transgression of the Bahá’í Teachings. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has stated that:

The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind. But the balance is already shifting; force is losing its dominance, and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. [9]

Bahá’í men have the opportunity to demonstrate to the world around them a new approach to the relationship between the sexes, where aggression and the use of force are eliminated and replaced by cooperation and consultation. The Universal House of Justice has pointed out in response to questions addressed to it that, in a marriage relationship, neither husband nor wife should ever unjustly dominate the other, and that there are times when the husband and the wife should defer to the wishes of the other, if agreement cannot be reached through consultation; each couple should determine exactly under what circumstances such deference is to take place. [10]

From the Pen of Bahá’u’lláh Himself has come the following statement on the subject of the treatment of women:

The friends of God must be adorned with the ornament of justice, equity, kindness, and love. As they do not allow themselves to be the object of cruelty and transgression, in like manner they should not allow such tyranny to visit the handmaidens of God. He, verily, speaketh the truth and commandeth that which benefitteth His servants and

Guidance from the Universal House of Justice, continued

“No Bahá’í husband should ever beat his wife, or subject her to any form of cruel treatment; to do so would be an unacceptable abuse of the marriage relationship and contrary to the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh.”

handmaidens. He is the Protector of all in this world and the next. [11]

No Bahá’í husband should ever beat his wife, or subject her to any form of cruel treatment; to do so would be an unacceptable abuse of the marriage relationship and contrary to the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh. [12]

The lack of spiritual values in society leads to a debasement of the attitudes which should govern the relationship between the sexes, with women being treated as no more than objects for sexual gratification and being denied the respect and courtesy to which all human beings are entitled. Bahá’u’lláh has warned: “They that follow their lusts and corrupt inclinations, have erred and dissipated their efforts. They, indeed, are of the lost.” Believers might well ponder the exalted standard of conduct to which they are encouraged to aspire in the statement of Bahá’u’lláh concerning His “true follower,” that: “And if he met the fairest and most comely of women, he would not feel his heart seduced by the least shadow of desire for her beauty. Such an one, indeed, is the creation of spotless chastity. Thus instructeth you the Pen of the Ancient of Days, as bidden by your Lord, the Almighty, the All-Bountiful.” [13]

One of the most heinous* of sexual offenses is the crime of rape. When a believer is a victim, she is entitled to the loving aid and support of the members of her community, and she is free to initiate action against the perpetrator under the law of the land should she wish to do so. If she becomes pregnant as a consequence of this assault, no pressure should be brought upon her by the Bahá’í institutions to marry. As to whether she should continue or terminate the pregnancy, it is for her to decide on the course of action she should follow, taking into consideration medical and other relevant factors, and in the light of the Bahá’í Teachings. If she gives birth to a child as a result of the rape, it is left to her discretion whether to seek financial support for the maintenance of the child from the father; however, his claim to any parental rights would, under Bahá’í law, be called into question, in view of the circumstances. [14]

*** Heinous:**
hateful; odious;
abominable, totally
reprehensible

The Guardian has clarified, in letters written on his behalf that, “The Bahá’í Faith recognizes the value of the sex impulse,”

Guidance from the Universal House of Justice, continued

“While the physical discipline of children is an acceptable part of their education and training, such actions are to be carried out ‘gently and patiently’ and with ‘loving care.’ . . .”

and that, “The proper use of the sex instinct is the natural right of every individual, and it is precisely for this very purpose that the institution of marriage has been established.” In this aspect of the marital relationship, as in all others, mutual consideration and respect should apply. If a Bahá’í woman suffers abuse or is subjected to rape by her husband, she has the right to turn to the Spiritual Assembly for assistance and counsel, or to seek legal protection. Such abuse would gravely jeopardize the continuation of the marriage, and could lead to a condition of irreconcilable antipathy.* [15]

You have raised several questions about the treatment of children. It is clear from the Bahá’í Writings that a vital component of the education of children is the exercise of discipline. Shoghi Effendi has stated, in a letter on his behalf about the education of children, that:

Discipline of some sort, whether physical, moral or intellectual, is indeed indispensable, and no training can be said to be complete and fruitful if it disregards this element. The child when born is far from being perfect. It is not only helpless, but actually is imperfect, and even naturally inclined towards evil. He should be trained, his natural inclinations harmonized, adjusted and controlled, and if necessary suppressed or regulated, so as to ensure his healthy physical and moral development. Bahá’í parents cannot simply adopt an attitude of non-resistance towards their children, particularly those who are unruly and violent by nature. It is not even sufficient that they should pray on their behalf. Rather they should endeavor to inculcate,* gently and patiently, into their youthful minds such principles of moral conduct and initiate them into the principles and teachings of the Cause with such tactful and loving care as would enable them to become “true sons of God” and develop into loyal and intelligent citizens of His Kingdom. . . . [16]

While the physical discipline of children is an acceptable part of their education and training, such actions are to be carried out “gently and patiently” and with “loving care,” far removed from the anger and violence with which children are beaten and abused in some parts of the world. To treat children in such an abhorrent* manner is a denial of their human rights, and a betrayal of the trust which the weak should have in the strong in a Bahá’í community. [17]

- * **Antipathy:**
repugnance; aversion
- * **Inculcate:**
to teach persistently and earnestly
- * **Abhorrent:**
abominable, causing repugnance or loathing

Guidance from the Universal House of Justice, continued

“A parent who is aware that the marriage partner is subjecting a child to . . . sexual abuse should not remain silent, but must take all necessary measures. . . .”

It is difficult to imagine a more reprehensible* perversion of human conduct than the sexual abuse of children, which finds its most debased form in incest. At a time in the fortunes of humanity when, in the words of the Guardian, “The perversion of human nature, the degradation of human conduct, the corruption and dissolution of human institutions, reveal themselves . . . in their worst and most revolting aspects,” and when “the voice of human conscience is stilled,” when “the sense of decency and shame is obscured,” the Bahá’í institutions must be uncompromising and vigilant in their commitment to the protection of the children entrusted to their care, and must not allow either threats or appeals to expediency to divert them from their duty. A parent who is aware that the marriage partner is subjecting a child to such sexual abuse should not remain silent, but must take all necessary measures, with the assistance of the Spiritual Assembly or civil authorities if necessary, to bring about an immediate cessation* of such grossly immoral behavior, and to promote healing and therapy. [18]

Bahá’u’lláh has placed great emphasis on the duties of parents toward their children, and He has urged children to have gratitude in their hearts for their parents, whose good pleasure they should strive to win as a means of pleasing God Himself. However, He has indicated that under certain circumstances, the parents could be deprived of the right of parenthood as a consequence of their actions. The Universal House of Justice has the right to legislate on this matter. It has decided for the present that all cases should be referred to it in which the conduct or character of a parent appears to render him unworthy of having such parental rights as that of giving consent to marriage. Such questions could arise, for example, when a parent has committed incest, or when the child was conceived as a consequence of rape, and also when a parent consciously fails to protect the child from flagrant* sexual abuse. [19]

- * **Reprehensible:**
blameworthy
- * **Cessation:**
complete ceasing;
discontinuance
- * **Flagrant:**
outrageously
noticeable or evident

As humanity passes through the age of transition in its evolution to a world civilization which will be illumined by spiritual values and will be distinguished by its justice and its unity, the role of the Bahá’í community is clear: it must accomplish a spiritual transformation of its members, and must offer to the world a model of the society destined to come into

Guidance from the Universal House of Justice, continued

“... the ultimate solution to the problems of humanity lies not in penalties and punishments, but rather in spiritual education and illumination.”

being through the power of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Membership in the Bahá'í community is open to all who accept Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God, and who thereupon embark on the process of changing their conduct and refining their character. It is inevitable that this community will, at times, be subject to delinquent behavior of members whose actions do not conform to the standards of the Teachings. At such times, the institutions of the Faith will not hesitate to apply Bahá'í law with justice and fairness in full confidence that this Divine Law is the means for the true happiness of all concerned. [20]

However, it should be recognized that the ultimate solution to the problems of humanity lies not in penalties and punishments, but rather in spiritual education and illumination. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has written:

It is incumbent* upon human society to expend all its forces on the education of the people, and to copiously* water men’s hearts with the sacred streams that pour down from the Realm of the All-merciful, and to teach them the manners of Heaven and spiritual ways of life, until every member of the community of man will be schooled, refined, and exalted to such a degree of perfection that the very committing of a shameful act will seem in itself the direst infliction and most agonizing of punishments, and man will fly in terror and seek refuge in his God from the very idea of crime, as something far harsher and more grievous than the punishment assigned to it. [21]

It is toward this goal that the community of the Greatest Name is striving, aided and reinforced by the limitless power of the Holy Spirit. [22]

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
For Department of the Secretariat

* **Incumbent:**
obligatory
* **Copiously:**
abundantly,
plentifully

Focus Questions for Guidance from the Universal House of Justice

Group Assignments:

Answer questions from the paragraphs indicated and prepare a brief report of the guidance from your section.

- ★ **All groups:** paragraph 2
- ★ **Group 1:** paragraphs 3-8
- ★ **Group 2:** paragraphs 9-15
- ★ **Group 3:** paragraphs 16-22

Note: Numbers in brackets next to each question indicate paragraphs of the letter that contain pertinent information.

All groups should answer this question

- ★ What is an intrinsic human right of every individual? [2]

Questions for Group One

1. What is a “flagrant transgression of the Bahá’í Teachings”? [4]
2. Can there be any justification for using force or the threat of violence to compel a person to do something he or she is not inclined to do? [4]
3. Who should be mindful of the condemnation in the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh against inflicting violence against another person? [4]
Optional extension: What can such persons do if they still feel they cannot control their behavior?
4. What are three signs of moral downfall? [5]
5. Who must not be drawn into acceptance of such practices as violence within the family, degrading and cruel treatment of spouses and children, and sexual abuse? [5]
6. What degree of care must be taken to avoid being drawn into acceptance of such practices? [5]
7. What way of life should they exemplify instead? [5]
8. What conditions make successful consultation unattainable? [6]
9. What principle must be “an integral element of Bahá’í domestic and community life”? [7]

Questions for Group Two

1. What is a “serious transgression of the Bahá’í Teachings”? [9]
2. When should a husband or wife defer to the other? [10]
3. What is “an unacceptable abuse of the marriage relationship and contrary to the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh”? [12]
4. What are Bahá’í victims of rape entitled to from their community? [14] *Optional extension: How, in practice, could members of a community do this?*
5. What four decisions are left to the judgment of Bahá’í rape victims? [14]

Focus Questions for Guidance from the Universal House of Justice, continued

Additional questions

6. Is the father of a child conceived by rape automatically entitled to parental rights under Bahá'í law? [14]
7. In the sexual aspect of marital life, as in all other aspects, what two qualities should apply? [15]
8. What rights does a Bahá'í woman have if she suffers abuse or rape by her husband? [15]

Questions for Group Three

1. If a child is physically disciplined, how should this be carried out? [17]
2. What characterizes the relationship that the weak should have with the strong in a Bahá'í community? [17] *Optional extension: Who might be considered "the weak" in a Bahá'í community? Who might be considered "the strong" in a Bahá'í community?*
3. List five characteristics mentioned by Shoghi Effendi that describe the time in which we live. [18]
4. What is the duty of Bahá'í institutions to the children entrusted to their care? [18] *Optional extension: Describe a concrete example of a threat that could divert a Local Spiritual Assembly from its duty to protect children. Describe a concrete example of an appeal to expediency that could divert a Local Spiritual Assembly from its duty to protect children.*
5. What is the responsibility of a parent who is aware that a marriage partner is sexually abusing a child? [18]
6. What should local Assemblies do in cases where the conduct or character of a parent raises questions about his or her parental rights? [19]
7. Under what circumstances could an individual's parental rights under Bahá'í law be called into question? [19]
8. What is the dual role of the Bahá'í community as humanity passes through its age of transition? [20]
9. What must institutions of the Faith do at those inevitable times when the Bahá'í community is subject to delinquent behavior of members? [20]
10. What is and is not the ultimate solution to the problems of humanity? [21]

Note: Numbers in brackets next to each question indicate paragraphs of the letter that contain pertinent information.

Summary Policy Statement on Domestic Violence

Summary Policy Statement on Domestic Violence of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States

The National Spiritual Assembly wishes to convey a clear message that acts of domestic violence are at complete variance with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and that violence in the family is a practice to be condemned. In addition, domestic violence is a criminal act in the United States. Such behaviors, on the part of either men or women, are rooted in longstanding social practices connected with an inability or unwillingness to apply the fundamental spiritual principle of the equality of women and men and to recognize the fundamental right of every human being to be treated with consideration and respect.

For the purposes of the work of the Bahá'í community, domestic violence should be understood broadly to include all forms of violence or abuse among family members or within the home. It encompasses behaviors in which one person uses coercion, intimidation, threats or violence to control the behavior of another. These behaviors usually escalate over time and may include verbal, physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuses, as well as neglect, property damage, terrorizing, corrupting, and stalking. In addition to the spiritual consequences for one who commits such acts, the above behaviors are violations of Bahá'í standards of conduct and may result in loss of Bahá'í administrative rights. Many of these behaviors are also violations of state and federal law and may result in civil or criminal penalties.

In the Bahá'í administrative system, Local Spiritual Assemblies have primary responsibility for addressing situations of domestic violence. It is the National Spiritual Assembly's policy to actively support Local Assemblies in developing their capacity to recognize and effectively address domestic violence situations for the purpose of eradicating such deplorable behaviors from the life of the Bahá'í community. The National Spiritual Assembly's strategies include providing all Local Assemblies with detailed written guidance, as well as offering training and case-by-case assistance. Such written guidance and training materials are made widely available for use by Bahá'í communities and by Bahá'í institutions, schools and organizations at all levels. As in other cases of violation of Bahá'í law, the sanction of removing an offender's Bahá'í administrative rights may be applied by the National Spiritual Assembly.

Summary Policy Statement on Domestic Violence, continued

“Overcoming and preventing all forms of domestic violence requires that local Bahá’í communities foster a spirit and active pattern of loving support for families and emphasize both personal and family development. . . .”

Recognizing that the functions of Local Assemblies and of various social service agencies and civil authorities are different and complementary, the National Spiritual Assembly encourages Local Assemblies to rely upon law enforcement and social service intervention in domestic violence situations, both for the immediate protection of individuals and for longer term needs. Local Assemblies are also responsible for assisting members of their communities to abide by Bahá’í standards of conduct, and they are encouraged to recommend to individuals the assistance of appropriate social services and counselors for this purpose. Therapeutic treatment is encouraged for both offenders and victims of domestic violence, as a valuable component of healing and personal spiritual transformation.

In contrast to obvious and extreme forms of domestic violence, the less extreme and non-criminal aspects of domestic violence present the challenge that they may not even be recognized as abusive. Yet they also are violations of Bahá’í standards of conduct, and they affect a broad segment of the population. Overcoming and preventing all forms of domestic violence requires that local Bahá’í communities foster a spirit and active pattern of loving support for families and emphasize both personal and family development in on-going education programs for children, youth and adults. The National Spiritual Assembly promotes such education at the local and regional levels through sponsoring schools, developing curricula, and training teachers and facilitators. The Bahá’í community aims to create models of marriage and family life that are founded on respect, equality, justice and unity and are conducive to the full human and spiritual development of every individual.

(Published 2002)

Focus questions

1. What does domestic violence encompass and how should it be viewed?
2. What implications does this statement have for Local Spiritual Assemblies ?
3. What implications does this statement have for individuals and the local community?

The Individual, the Assembly, and Domestic Violence

Reading assignments* and scenarios

Group 1

Scenario:

“A friend approaches you and says she was forced into sexual activity by her date, who is a member of the Assembly. What do you do?”

Reading assignment*:

- “Contrast between Role of Individual and Role of Assembly,” pp. 24-25*
- “Role of Individual: General Considerations,” pp. 25-31*

Group 2

Scenario:

“A friend said she had to talk to you but made you promise to keep the conversation confidential. She said her temper got away from her and she hit her child so hard the child had to be taken to the emergency room. You did not report the matter to the Assembly or to civil authorities because you had given your word, but a hospital worker reported a suspected case of abuse. You have now been summoned by civil authorities for questioning in the matter. What do you do?”

Reading assignment*:

- “Contrast between Role of Individual and Role of Assembly,” pp. 24-25*
- “Role of Individual: Considerations for Individuals Pertaining to Confidentiality,” pp. 31-34*

*** Reading assignments are all from *Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies on Domestic Violence: A Supplement to Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities***

Closing Quotations

“The friends of God must be adorned with the ornament of justice, equity, kindness, and love.”

“O Son of Spirit! The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee.”

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 2.

“The friends of God must be adorned with the ornament of justice, equity, kindness, and love. As they do not allow themselves to be the object of cruelty and transgression, in like manner they should not allow such tyranny to visit the handmaidens of God. He, verily, speaketh the truth and commandeth that which benefitteth His servants and handmaidens. He is the Protector of all in this world and the next.”

Bahá'u'lláh, in *Women*, p. 27, #54.

“Assist the world of humanity as much as possible. Be the source of consolation to every sad one, assist every weak one, be helpful to every indigent one, care for every sick one, be the cause of glorification to every lowly one, and shelter those who are overshadowed by fear.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 453.

“As humanity passes through the age of transition in its evolution to a world civilization which will be illumined by spiritual values and will be distinguished by its justice and its unity, the role of the Bahá'í community is clear: it must accomplish a spiritual transformation of its members, and must offer to the world a model of the society destined to come into being through the power of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, January 24, 1993.

Supplemental Readings

The following materials provide helpful perspectives on domestic violence

Table of Contents

- ★ **Violence Within Marriage:** A Statement by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand (Participant Handouts pp. 19-22)
- ★ **Warning Signs**, adapted from material prepared by Sandy Moravec (Participant Handouts pp. 23-25)
- ★ **Suggestions for Helping**, from *Domestic Violence: The Facts* (Participant Handouts pp. 26-27)
- ★ **Personalized Safety Plan**, from *Domestic Violence: The Facts* (Participant Handouts, pp. 28-30)
- ★ **Five Characteristics of Children and their Reaction to Abuse**, an adaptation by Wilson Ballard of “*The Child Abuse Accommodation Syndrome*,” by Roland Summit (Participant's Handouts pp. 31-38)

Note: These materials are provided for workshop participants as additional information without any guarantee as to their suitability for or applicability to any particular situation. They are not exhaustive on the subjects they address and should not be viewed as explicit guidance on any of these topics. Participants are advised to contact professionals in the field of domestic violence for assistance in addressing specific situations.

Violence within Marriage

**A statement by
the National
Spiritual
Assembly of the
Bahá'ís of New
Zealand**

This statement, published in the December 1993-January 1994 issue of New Zealand Bahá'í News, shows how one Bahá'í community is attempting to examine and address the problem of violence in its midst:

Many of the problems that exist within society also exist within the Bahá'í community. Problems do not vanish from our personal lives just because we have “signed up” as Bahá'ís, or have recognized Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for this age. It isn't enough to acknowledge the Divine Physician. We must apply His remedy.

Violence, wherever it occurs, is abhorred in the Bahá'í Faith. As the overwhelming experience within society and within the Bahá'í community is men's violence to women, this is the perspective of the National Spiritual Assembly in preparing this statement. This cannot be taken as indicating any less serious a view being held on other manifestations of violence.

Violence is especially debilitating and reprehensible when it takes place within what is meant to be the safety of one's own home and the sanctity of marriage.

The man who batters his wife, whether with words, fists or feet, may be an ordinary man, who, in the Bahá'í community, comes to Feast, hosts a Holy Day commemoration, participates in Assembly consultation, and on the way home will scream at and abuse his wife for not supporting his view, for smiling at another man, or for talking privately to one of the women. Any behavior of his wife that he can construe as unsupportive, provocative, or independent, may become the “cause” of an outburst. A man who behaves like this – usually only in private – will often say he “just lost control”. However, the violent, abusive man usually exercises perfect control over himself; he doesn't behave that way to his work-mates, the police, or other members of the community. He keeps himself well controlled until in the privacy of his home, where his wife and children become the victims of his abuse. Such behavior is seldom the result of a disturbed personality and it can be challenged, modified and prevented.

What is the effect for the wife and children of a violent man? The woman becomes increasingly fearful, for that is the intention

Violence within Marriage, continued

“A frightened mother will find, increasingly, that she has to make decisions about the care and well-being of her children which she knows are not good for them, but in an effort to ‘keep the peace’ she will put her violent husband’s demands before the rights and needs of her children.”

of violence – it is intended to control behavior by producing fear. Such a woman manifests her fear by trying, in turn, to control the environment, so that her husband will have no cause for outbursts. It is a losing battle. The violent, abusive man will always find a reason to express his violence; the house isn’t tidy enough; the children were noisy at Feast; she bought a book without his permission; she was elected to the Local Spiritual Assembly.

In addition to trying to control the environment in the home, family and community, the wife of a violent husband will begin to barter her primary responsibility as first educator of their children. In a marriage between equal and mature people, they recognise that the purpose of their marriage is “that from you may appear he who will remember Me amongst My servants.” (1) A violent husband is one who insists, overtly through his words, or covertly through his behavior, that his needs come first.

A frightened mother will find, increasingly, that she has to make decisions about the care and well-being of her children which she knows are not good for them, but in an effort to “keep the peace” she will put her violent husband’s demands before the rights and needs of her children.

Often lacking transportation (“Oh, he needs the car tonight”, or “My husband says the car wouldn’t make it to the conference”) and money (“I can’t afford to give to the Fund”), the wife of a violent husband will become increasingly isolated from the Bahá’í Community. If he physically beats her, it will be when the bruises show or she’s too sore to move easily that she retreats from the community. If his violence is verbal and psychological, she will increasingly feel unworthy to participate in Bahá’í activities. His verbal abuse will erode her self-confidence. She will become increasingly preoccupied with him and his needs, and with keeping the peace. She may become forgetful, indifferent to her appearance, fearful of saying or doing the “wrong” thing. She may become suicidal and anxious about her sanity.

The children from a violent home will usually appear subdued, unwilling to take risks, unable to try new things, and lack spontaneity. The boys will often exhibit violent, anti-social behavior in play as they mirror the same-gender role model. The

Violence within Marriage, continued

“In homes where there is violence, sons often grow up to be violent men, and daughters often grow up to be submissive, lacking in self-worth, and end up marrying violent men – thus repeating the cycle.”

girls will often be passive and may be unusually helpful, as they mimic their mother’s pacifying role. As youth they may be particularly rebellious, not only against their families but maybe against the Bahá’í Faith.

In homes where there is violence, sons often grow up to be violent men, and daughters often grow up to be submissive, lacking in self-worth, and end up marrying violent men – thus repeating the cycle.

And what of these violent men in our midst? A few of them know that what they are doing is wrong. They love Bahá’u’lláh and desire with all their hearts to align their lives with His teachings. These men are ashamed of their behavior. They will be grateful for the recognition by the Local Spiritual Assembly of their problem. They will readily acknowledge that they are at fault and eagerly pursue a prescribed course of behavior modification.

Most violent men, however, do not know that what they are doing is wrong. They sincerely believe that everyone else is to blame for their problems. Pointing out to these men that what they are doing is wrong isn’t enough. They will merely find ways of disguising their violence, rather than uprooting it from their lives. In His Will and Testament, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote: “Every aggressor deprives himself of God’s grace.” (2)

Husbands who act violently towards their wives and children are the men ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to as tyrants. (3) Kindness to such men only encourages their bad behavior. “Kindness cannot be shown the tyrant, the deceiver, or the thief, because, far from awakening them to the error of their ways, it maketh them to continue in their perversity as before.” (4)

At this time in our spiritual evolution, we Bahá’ís are still far more influenced by our culture than we are by the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. It is the responsibility of the parents within the family, of the local Assembly within the Bahá’í community, and the Bahá’í communities within society, to create an environment in which men’s violence within the family is unacceptable and intolerated.

The Universal House of Justice has stated that: “No husband should subject his wife to abuse of any kind, whether emotional, mental or physical.”

Violence within Marriage, continued

“The abuse by husbands of their wives is kept hidden in our Bahá’í communities because of a powerful combination of influences. . . .”

The abuse by husbands of their wives is kept hidden in our Bahá’í communities because of a powerful combination of influences such as isolation; violence which is glorified, amplified and sensationalized by the media; “ownership” of family members; the idea that family violence is between two equals rather than the reality of one weaker partner; economic dependence; and lack of police, legal or community protection. The idea of protection of the Faith has, unfortunately, occasionally been used by well-meaning believers to avoid dealing with violence within a marriage.

Now is the time to face the issue of violence in our own lives and in the lives of those around us. Violence in the Bahá’í community needs to be addressed as it stunts the growth of the human resources of the Faith. It inhibits the proper functioning of our institutions.

Many institutions within New Zealand have recently taken up the challenge not only to address violence, but also to develop policies and procedures by which women can seek help. This will enable women to take their full place within society. Thus it is timely for the National Spiritual Assembly to respond to a need within the Bahá’í community by providing guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies. Assemblies will be called upon to provide guidance to men and women within their communities who need protection, challenge, and support for change.

The National Spiritual Assembly and the Auxiliary Board members stand ready to support Local Spiritual Assemblies and the believers at large in their efforts to courageously address and to progressively eliminate the violence from our midst.

Footnotes:

1. Bahá’u’lláh, in *Bahá’í Prayers*, 1954 edition, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States, p. 105.
2. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, cited in *Bahá’í World Faith*, 1943 edition, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States, p. 445.
3. Tyrant: “Person exercising power or authority arbitrarily or cruelly.” Concise Oxford Dictionary.
4. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 1978 edition, p. 158.
5. Universal House of Justice, in *Preserving Bahá’í Marriages*, December 1990, #46. Also in *The Compilation of Compilations*, p. 459, # 2347.

Warning Signs

“Warning signs often precede domestic violence, but they may go unnoticed. . . .”

Warning signs often precede domestic violence, but they may go unnoticed, both by those unwilling to consider that they may be involved in an abusive relationship and by local Spiritual Assemblies, whose members are generally not trained to work with situations involving domestic violence.

The lists below, adapted from materials developed by Sandy Moravec, a psychotherapist and certified domestic violence counselor, highlight behaviors that suggest a controlling or potentially dangerous situation. Behaviors *in italics* suggest the need for immediate help.

These behaviors suggest a controlling relationship:

- ★ Your partner continually monitors your time and makes you account for every minute (when you run errands, visit friends, commute to work, etc.).
- ★ Your partner accuses you of having affairs with other men (or women) or acts suspicious that you are.
- ★ Your partner is rude to your friends.
- ★ Your partner calls you names or curses at you.
- ★ Your partner belittles you for your race, age, gender, education, abilities, or ideas.
- ★ Your partner discourages you from starting new friendships.
- ★ You feel isolated and alone, as if there is nobody close to confide in.
- ★ Your partner tells you that you’ll never “make it” without him/her, or that no one would ever want you.
- ★ Your partner is overly critical of daily things such as your clothes, your appearance, your cooking, etc.
- ★ Your partner demands a strict account of how you spend money.
- ★ Your partner has threatened to call the police, or your family, or your boss, or Social Services if you disagree or refuse to go along with what he/she wants.
- ★ Your partner has blocked your freedom of movement, i.e. blocking a doorway, taking your keys, taking your distributor cap, etc.

Warning Signs, continued

Behaviors in italics suggest the need for immediate help.

- ★ Your partner is disturbed by your working or by the thought of you working.
- ★ Your partner pressures you for sex much more often than you'd like.
- ★ Your partner becomes angry if you don't want to go along with his/her requests for sex.
- ★ *Your partner has threatened to take the kids so that you'll never see them again.*
- ★ Your partner has played "mind games" or made you think you were crazy.
- ★ Your partner has treated you like a servant.
- ★ Your partner has "gotten in your face" (yelling or threatening 2 or 3 inches from your nose) when angry.

These behaviors suggest a dangerous or potentially dangerous situation:

- ★ Your partner's moods change radically, from very calm to very angry.
- ★ Your partner has gotten out weapons (guns, knives, etc.) to look at, to clean, or to play with when you are having an argument.
- ★ Your partner has physically restrained you.
- ★ Your partner becomes angry more easily if he/she drinks or uses drugs
- ★ *You have had to leave your home because you were frightened of your partner's behavior.*
- ★ Your partner blames you for his/her own acts of violence.
- ★ *Your partner has struck you with his/her hands or feet (slap, punch, kick, etc.).*
- ★ *Your partner has struck you with an object.*
- ★ *Your partner has threatened you with an object or weapon.*
- ★ *Your partner has threatened to kill either himself/herself or you.*
- ★ *Your partner is obsessed with you, unwilling to let you go.*

Warning Signs, continued

Behaviors in italics suggest the need for immediate help.

- ★ Your partner follows you to work, to school, or repeatedly calls to check on where you are.
- ★ *There are holes in your walls, doors off hinges, or telephones ripped out of the wall.*
- ★ *Your partner has given you visible injuries such as welts, bruises, cuts, lumps on the head.*
- ★ *You have had to treat with first aid an injury from his/her violence.*
- ★ *You have had to seek professional aid at a medical clinic, doctor's office, or hospital emergency room for an injury caused by your partner.*
- ★ *Your partner has hurt you sexually or forced you to have intercourse.*
- ★ *Your partner is violent toward children.*
- ★ *Your partner has choked you or pulled you by your hair.*
- ★ Your partner has been violent toward people outside your home and family.
- ★ *Your partner has thrown you, or tried to throw you, down, or into a wall, or into a kitchen counter, etc.*
- ★ *Your partner has twisted your arm, tripped you, or bit you.*
- ★ *Your partner has attacked the sexual parts of your body.*
- ★ Your partner has hurt or threatened to hurt pets.
- ★ Your partner has intentionally destroyed your property.
- ★ Your partner throws objects or breaks things when angry.
- ★ Your partner has been in trouble with the police.
- ★ *Your partner has said that if he/she can't have you, no one else will.*
- ★ You have called the police or tried to call them because you felt you or other members of your family were in danger.

Suggestions for Helping

Here are some basic steps you can take to assist someone who may be a target of domestic violence:

Do you know someone in a battering relationship? Do you suspect that a friend, relative, or someone you know is being abused? If so, don't be afraid to offer help – you just might save someone's life. Here are some basic steps you can take to assist someone who may be a target of domestic violence:

Approach your friend in an understanding, non-blaming way. Tell her/him that s/he is not alone, that there are people like her/him in the same kind of situation, and that it takes strength to survive and trust someone enough to talk about battering.

Acknowledge that it is scary and difficult to talk about domestic violence. Tell this person that s/he doesn't deserve to be threatened, hit or beaten. Nothing a person can do or say makes the abuser's violence OK.

Share information. Discuss the dynamics of violence and how abuse is based on power and control.

Support this person as a friend. Be a good listener. Encourage her/him to express her/his hurt and anger. Allow the person to make her/his own decisions, even if it means not being ready to leave the abusive relationship.

Ask if your friend has suffered physical harm. Go with her/him to the hospital to check for injuries. Help report the assault to the police, if s/he chooses to do so.

Provide information on help available to battered women, men, and their children, including social services, emergency shelter, counseling services, and legal advice. To find this information, call local listings in the Yellow Pages under Social and Human Services.

Inform your friend about legal protection that is available in most states under abuse prevention laws. Go with her/him to district, probate, or superior court to get a protective order to prevent further harassment by the abuser. If you can't go, find someone who can.

Suggestions for Helping, continued

**Additional
basic steps:**

Plan safe strategies for leaving an abusive relationship. These are often called “safety plans.” Never encourage someone to follow a safety plan that the person believes will put her/him at further risk. And remember that your friend may not feel comfortable taking these materials with her/him.

(from *Domestic Violence: The Facts*, by Peace at Home. Used with permission)

Personalized Safety Plan

Suggestions for increasing safety while still in the relationship:

★ I will have important phone numbers available to my children and myself. (See page 30)

★ I can tell _____ and

_____ about the violence and ask them to call the police if they hear suspicious noises coming from my home.

★ If I leave my home, I can go (list four places):

★ I can leave extra money, car keys, clothes, and copies of documents with

★ If I leave, I will bring

(See checklist on page 30)

★ To ensure safety and independence, I can: keep change for phone calls with me at all times; open my own savings account; rehearse my escape route with a support person; and review safety plan on _____ (date).

Personalized Safety Plan, continued

Suggestions for increasing safety when the relationship is over:

- ★ I can: change the locks; install steel/metal doors, a security system, smoke detectors and an outside lighting system.
- ★ I will inform _____ and _____
that my partner no longer lives with me and ask them to call the police if s/he is observed near my home or my children.
- ★ I will tell people who take care of my children the names of those who have permission to pick them up.
- ★ The people who have permission are:

- ★ I can tell _____ at work about my situation and ask _____ to screen my calls.
- ★ I can avoid stores, banks, and _____ that I used when living with my battering partner.
- ★ I can obtain a protective order from _____.
- ★ I can keep this order on or near me at all times as well as leave a copy with _____.
- ★ If I feel down and ready to return to a potentially abusive situation, I can call _____
for support or attend workshops and support groups to gain support and strengthen my relationships with other people.

Personalized Safety Plan, continued

Suggestions for increasing safety:

Important Phone Numbers

Police: _____

Hotline: _____

Friends: _____

Shelter: _____

Items to Take Checklist

- ___ Identification
- ___ Birth certificates for me and my children
- ___ Social Security cards
- ___ School and medical records
- ___ Money, bankbooks, credit cards
- ___ Keys - house/car/office
- ___ Driver's license and registration
- ___ Medications
- ___ Change of clothes
- ___ Welfare identification
- ___ Passport(s), Green Card(s), work permits
- ___ Divorce papers
- ___ Lease/rental agreement, house deed
- ___ Mortgage payment book, current unpaid bills
- ___ Insurance papers
- ___ Address book
- ___ Pictures, jewelry, items of sentimental value
- ___ Children's favorite toys and/or blankets

(from *Domestic Violence: The Facts*, by Peace at Home. Used with permission)

Five Characteristics of Children and Their Reaction to Abuse

Sexual abuse tends to present the most extreme examples of the dynamics involved for a child who is subject to abuse. These dynamics also apply to other forms of child abuse as well.

Sexual abuse tends to present the most extreme examples of the dynamics involved for a child who is subject to abuse. These dynamics also apply to other forms of child abuse as well, though they are often less obvious. This article is an adaptation by Wilson Ballard of “The Child Abuse Accommodation Syndrome” by Dr. Roland C. Summit. Quotations cited are from Dr. Summit’s essay published in *Child Abuse and Neglect*, Volume 7, pp. 177-193, 1983.

1. The child is helpless.

This helplessness has two dimensions. First, the child depends upon his caregivers to defend him bodily. More importantly, the child depends upon his caregivers to teach him how to understand his experience. He is very dependent upon what his caregivers say and do not say.

Child abuse involves at least the second aspect, and often the first as well.

2. The child will be told to keep the abuse secret.

“Initiation, intimidation, stigmatization, helplessness, and self-blame depend upon a terrifying reality of child sexual abuse: It happens only when the child is alone with the offending adult, and it must never be shared with anyone else.

“Virtually no child is prepared for the possibility of molestation by a trusted adult; that possibility is a well kept secret even among adults. The child is, therefore, entirely dependent on the intruder for whatever reality is assigned to the experience. Of all the inadequate, illogical, self-serving, or self-protective explanations provided by the adult, the only consistent and meaningful impression gained by the child is one of danger and fearful outcome based on secrecy.

- ★ ‘This is our secret; nobody else will understand.’
- ★ ‘Don’t tell anybody.’
- ★ ‘Nobody will believe you.’
- ★ ‘Don’t tell your mother; (a) she will hate you (b) she will hate me (c) she will kill you (d) she will kill me (e) it will kill her (f) she will send you away (g) she will send me away, or (h) it will break up the family and you will end up in an orphanage.’

Five Characteristics of Children and Their Reaction to Abuse, continued

“The secrecy is both the source of fear and the promise of safety: ‘Everything will be all right if you just don’t tell.’”

- ★ ‘If you tell anyone (a) I won’t love you anymore, (b) I’ll spank you, (c) I’ll kill your dog, or (d) I’ll kill you.’

“However gentle or menacing the intimidation may be, the secrecy makes it clear to the child that this is something bad and dangerous. The secrecy is both the source of fear and the promise of safety: ‘Everything will be all right if you just don’t tell.’ The secret takes on magical, monstrous proportions for the child. A child with no knowledge or awareness of sex and even with no pain or embarrassment from the sexual experience itself will still be stigmatized with a sense of badness and danger from the pervasive secrecy.

“Any attempts by the child to illuminate the secret will be countered by an adult conspiracy of silence and disbelief.

- ★ ‘Don’t worry about things like that: that could never happen in our family.’
- ★ ‘Nice children don’t talk about things like that.’
- ★ ‘Uncle Johnnie doesn’t mean you any harm; that’s just his way of showing how much he loves you.’
- ★ ‘How could you ever think of such a terrible thing?’
- ★ ‘Don’t let me ever hear you say anything like that again!’

“The average child never asks and never tells. Contrary to the general expectation that the victim would normally seek help, the majority of the victims in retrospective surveys had never told anyone during their childhood. Respondents expressed fear that they would be blamed for what had happened or that a parent would not be able to protect them from retaliation. Many of those who sought help reported that parents became hysterical or punishing or pretended that nothing had happened.

“Yet adult expectation dominates the judgment applied to disclosures of sexual abuse. When the child does not immediately complain, it is painfully apparent to any child that there is no second chance.

- ★ ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’
- ★ ‘How could you keep such a thing secret?’

Five Characteristics of Children and Their Reaction to Abuse, continued

“Unless the victim can find some permission and power to share the secret and unless there is a possibility of an engaging, non-punitive response to disclosure, the child is likely to spend a lifetime in what comes to be a self-imposed exile from intimacy, trust, and self-validation.”

- ★ ‘Why did you wait until now if it really happened so long ago?’
- ★ ‘How can you expect me to believe such a fantastic story?’

“Unless the victim can find some permission and power to share the secret and unless there is a possibility of an engaging, non-punitive response to disclosure, the child is likely to spend a lifetime in what comes to be a self-imposed exile from intimacy, trust, and self-validation.”

3. The child accommodates to survive.

Abuse is not typically a one-time event. On the physical level, especially in cases involving primary caregivers, accommodating abuse usually means enduring it.

On the psychological level the child must incorporate the abuse into his understanding of human relationships. Dependent and helpless, the child understands what it is to be human through his parents and primary caregivers. He has no basis for recognizing that his parent could act inhumanly towards him. If he should suffer inhuman treatment from his parent, recognizing and forgiving this reality may well be a life-long struggle.

“The only acceptable alternative for the child is to believe that she has provoked the painful encounters and to hope that by learning to be good she can earn love and acceptance. The desperate assumption of responsibility and the inevitable failure to earn relief set the foundation for self-hate. . . .”

“The sexually abusing parent provides graphic example and instruction in how to be good, that is, the child must be available without complaint to the parent’s sexual demands. There is an explicit or implicit promise of rewards. If she is good and if she keeps the secret, she can

- ★ protect her siblings from sexual involvement (‘It’s a good thing I can count on you to love me; otherwise I’d have to turn to your little sister’)
- ★ protect her mother from disintegration (‘If your mother ever found out, it would kill her’)

Five Characteristics of Children and Their Reaction to Abuse, continued

“There is an inevitable splitting of conventional moral values. Maintaining a lie to keep the secret is the ultimate virtue, while telling the truth is the greatest sin.”

- ★ protect her father from temptation (‘If I couldn’t count on you, I’d have to hang out in bars and look for other women’)
- ★ preserve the security of the home (‘If you ever tell, they could send me to jail and put all you kids in an orphanage’)

“In the classic role reversal of child abuse, the child is given the power to destroy the family and the responsibility to keep it together. The child, *not the parent*, must mobilize the altruism and self-control to insure the survival of the others. The child, in short, must secretly assume many of the role-functions ordinarily assigned to the mother.

“There is an inevitable splitting of conventional moral values. Maintaining a lie to keep the secret is the ultimate virtue, while telling the truth is the greatest sin.”

A child entrapped in a continuous cycle of abuse is under severe pressure to find a way to keep some hope of goodness alive:

- ★ “She may turn to imaginary companions for reassurance.
- ★ She may develop multiple personalities, assigning helplessness and suffering to one, badness and rage to another, sexual power to another, love and compassion to another, etc.
- ★ She may discover altered states of consciousness to shut off pain or to dissociate from her body, as if looking on from a distance at the child suffering the abuse.

“The same mechanisms which allow psychic survival for the child become handicaps . . . as an adult.

“If the child [does not find a way to reconcile] the continuing outrage, the intolerance of helplessness and the increasing feeling of rage will seek active expression. For the girl this often leads to self-destruction and reinforcement of self-hate: self-mutilation, suicidal behavior, promiscuous sexual activity and repeated runaways are typical. . . . She may fight with both parents, but her greatest rage is likely to focus on her mother, whom she blames for abandoning her to her father. She assumes that her mother must know of the sexual abuse and is either too uncaring or too ineffectual to intervene. Ultimately the child tends to believe that she is intrinsically so rotten that she was never worth

Five Characteristics of Children and Their Reaction to Abuse, continued

“It is worth restating that all these accommodation mechanisms . . . are part of the survival skills of the child. They can be overcome only if the child can be led to trust in a secure environment which can provide consistent, noncontingent acceptance and caring.”

caring for. . . [She may become] all the more dependent on the pathetic hope of gaining acceptance and protection with an abusive male. . . .

“The male victim of sexual abuse is more likely to turn his rage outward in aggressive and antisocial behavior. He is even more intolerant of his helplessness than the female victim and more likely to rationalize that he is exploiting the relationship for his own benefit. . . . Various admixtures of depression, counterphobic violence, misogyny (again, the mother is seen as non-caring and unprotective), child molestation, and rape seem to be part of the legacy of rage endowed in the sexually abused boy.

“It is worth restating that all these accommodation mechanisms – domestic martyrdom, splitting of reality, altered consciousness, hysterical phenomena, delinquency, sociopathy, projection of rage, even self-mutilation – are part of the survival skills of the child. They can be overcome only if the child can be led to trust in a secure environment which can provide consistent, *noncontingent* acceptance and caring. In the meantime, anyone working therapeutically with the child (or the grown-up, still shattered victim) may be tested and provoked to prove that trust is impossible, and that the only secure reality is negative expectations and self-hate.”

While the Bahá'í community is not responsible for providing therapy to its members, it is worth considering its role as a “secure environment which can provide consistent, *noncontingent* acceptance and caring.” Consider the following quotation on behalf of Shoghi Effendi:

“The people of the world not only need the laws and principles of the Bahá'í Faith – they desperately need to see the love that is engendered by it in the hearts of its followers, and to partake of that atmosphere of tolerance, understanding, forbearance and active kindness which should be the hall-mark of a Bahá'í Community.” (*Lights of Guidance*, 5th ed, p. 405, #1345)

Five Characteristics of Children and Their Reaction to Abuse, continued

“Most ongoing sexual abuse is never disclosed, at least outside the immediate family. Treated, reported, or investigated cases are the exception, not the norm.”

4. If the force of the secret is strong, disclosure by the child will be delayed, conflicted, and unconvincing to those who hear it.

“Most ongoing sexual abuse is *never* disclosed, at least outside the immediate family. Treated, reported, or investigated cases are the exception, not the norm.”

“Contrary to popular myth most mothers are not aware of ongoing sexual abuse. . . .

“Of the minority of incest secrets that are disclosed to the mother or discovered by the mother, very few are subsequently reported to outside agencies. The mother will either disbelieve the complaint or try to negotiate a resolution within the family.”

“The victim of incestuous abuse tends to remain silent until she enters adolescence when she becomes capable of demanding a more separate life for herself and challenging the authority of her parents.”

Except in cases involving incidental discovery by third parties, or sensitive outreach and education by professionals, such as child protective services, disclosure of an abuse secret is typically an impulsive act of an adolescent angered in a family fight by a parent’s infliction of a humiliating punishment: “After an especially punishing family fight and a belittling showdown of authority by the father, the girl is finally driven by anger to let go of the secret.”

Unless they are especially trained, adults hearing such a disclosure are inclined not to believe it:

- ★ They expect children to behave obediently and lovingly towards their caregivers, and are especially repelled if expressions of rage accompany the disclosure.
- ★ They do not believe that an apparently normal parent, often a respected member of the community, would be capable of such abuse, and they are likely to identify with what they see as a parent’s attempt to cope with a rebellious teenager.
- ★ The context of the family fight that motivated the disclosure suggests that the child may be fabricating the story to retaliate

Five Characteristics of Children and Their Reaction to Abuse, continued

“Unless there is special support for the child and immediate intervention to force responsibility on the father, the girl will follow the ‘normal’ course and retract her complaint.”

for a punishment. This idea has additional credence if in general the child shows a pattern of unruly, self-destructive behavior that is unattractive and seems to justify the parent’s resort to punishment. On the other hand, it also has additional credence if a punishment that appears exaggerated or extreme seems to explain why a child would be motivated to retaliate against a parent with a fictitious allegation of abuse.

- ★ They do not believe that a normal child would not have reported the abuse when it began, typically years earlier. This idea has additional credence if in general the child shows a pattern of orderly behavior that is attractive and looks “normal.”

In short, whatever the scenario of facts, adults without training in the underlying dynamics from the child’s point of view tend to disbelieve the disclosure.

5. The child’s disclosures are likely to be retracted.

“Beneath the anger of impulsive disclosure remains the ambivalence of guilt and the martyred obligation to preserve the family. In the chaotic aftermath of disclosure, the child discovers that the bedrock fears and threats underlying the secrecy are true. Her father abandons her and calls her a liar. Her mother does not believe her or [falls apart in] hysteria and rage. The family is fragmented, and all the children are placed in custody. The father is threatened with disgrace and imprisonment. The girl is blamed for causing the whole mess, and everyone seems to treat her like a freak. She is interrogated about all the tawdry details and encouraged to incriminate her father, yet the father remains unchallenged, remaining at home in the security of the family. She is held in custody with no apparent hope of returning home if the dependency petition is sustained.”

“Unless there is special support for the child and immediate intervention to force responsibility on the father, the girl will follow the ‘normal’ course and retract her complaint. The girl ‘admits’ she made up the story:

- ★ ‘I was awful mad at my Dad for punishing me. He hit me and said I could never see my boyfriend again. I’ve been really bad for years and nothing seems to keep me from getting into

Five Characteristics of Children and Their Reaction to Abuse, continued

trouble. Dad had plenty of reason to be mad at me. But I got real mad and just had to find some way of getting out of that place. So I made up this story about him fooling around with me and everything. I didn't mean to get everyone in so much trouble.'

“This simple lie carries more credibility than the most explicit claims of incestuous entrapment.”