

Tackle child abuse proactively

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T&T has a long history of child abuse and, despite new revelations every year, it hardly seems as though there is any progress in containing this social scourge. This abuse takes three main forms: (1) punishment carried to excess; (2) carelessness leading to injury or death; and (3) abuse that ends in murder. Yet even this last has not had any consequences for the perpetrators.

The killer of Akiel Chambers is still free 17 years after the boy's bugged body was found at the bottom of a swimming pool. This is also the case for most other child murderers who, even when there were suspects, have not been convicted. And while abusers caught on social media video have

been prosecuted, this seems to have made little impact on other perpetrators. And, of course, the majority of Trimbagomians still hold that licks is necessary to teach children right from wrong and that the line between such punishment and abuse is a clear one.

Yet it may be that a sea change has been happening. After all, the last video of such an outrageous act was posted because a young person wanted action taken to stop the abuse of a three-year-old girl. Institutionally, the Children's Authority has finally started to function, more than 15 years after the legislation was first drafted. And the courts have taken stern action against even mothers who

have gone beyond "reasonable chastisement" in punishing their children.

If there is a trend, however, it needs to be nurtured, encouraged, and catalysed. This country still has far too many incidents of child deaths, whether through accident or homicide, and the cases of abuse which do come to light may well be the exception rather than the rule. Protecting the nation's young requires concerted action on all three fronts by the relevant authorities, as well as non-governmental organisations and individual citizens.

Ironically, it is the most extreme cases which may be easiest to tackle, relatively speaking. This is because the profiles of children

who are most likely to be abused or killed is quite clear-cut. These children usually come from the lower socio-economic stratum, live in a home with a single mother or stepfather, or have care-givers who are neither relatives nor professional. It is these at-risk children who must be targeted by social workers and schools, working in tandem to ensure their safety. However, in the notorious case of four-year-old Amy Annamunthodo ten years ago, the child's physical abuse was known to social workers and she had even been hospitalised, yet she was sent back to the home where she was eventually raped, beaten and suffocated. A report was submitted, but no one was officially censured, let alone fired, and if any procedural changes were instituted in the social work department, they remain secret. This is something that a serious government can tackle. In the

case of carelessness, however, prevention becomes more complicated. Obviously, not all accidents can be avoided. Yet the authorities can still take certain actions to protect children from their caregivers' ignorance. For example, falling iron gates are responsible for several child deaths. The government should therefore consider passing licensing requirements for such companies, in order to ensure they install proper safety features. Even more important is the licensing of private day-care centres, which can at present be opened by anyone. The death last week of an infant was apparently caused by a most fundamental lack of knowledge, since the people involved did not know that babies must always be put to sleep on their backs or sides. But the hardest row to hoe is undoubtedly bringing about an attitudinal change on the part of parents. But targeted and tailored interventions in other countries have been shown to work and can readily be adapted here. If the political will is there, such measures can begin to bear young fruit almost at once.

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