

# WORKING WITH ABUSIVE PARENTS

## *A Parent's View*

An interview with Jolly K. by Judith Reed

**W**hat I can tell you is what you won't get from the other speakers—the guts of a person going through child abuse. Being there doesn't automatically make you an expert on child abuse but it tells what it's like . . .

"Child abusers are going through hell. We have a vision of how powerful our anger can be, a concept of where this anger will take us if we are pushed too far, and the constant dread that we will be pushed that far. For abuse is usually not a singular incident but part of a consistent pattern . . .

"We don't like being child abusers any more than society likes the problem of abuse. If a positive approach is offered abusers, they will usually respond . . .

"I'm convinced that parents are aware of their feelings and let others know. But we don't know how to listen. Too many of our parents have told society time and time again: 'Help me! I'm at my wit's end. Help me before I bring my kid there too!' How can we learn to listen and respond? Too many parents are afraid to go to agencies because they fear that their child will be taken away . . .

"Our defense mechanisms may make it difficult to read us but look to see what went into our lives to make us this way . . . It's true that we're socially alienated, most of us with good reason. Ninety percent of us were abused as children. I can remember not being loved when I was a child. But I just thought I was a rotten little kid and that's why I was being tossed from foster home to foster home. Since most of us grew up viewing others as part of negative, hurtful relationships, why should we form more relationships now? . . .

"The feeling parents most often talk about in P.A. is fear—fear of what they're doing, fear of what will happen if they don't get help and fear of what will happen if they do. And, of course, their fears are reality-based.

"Many of us in P.A. also have a constant dread that our behavior is indicative of insanity, that we are losing our minds. We think: 'I had no control over a lot of things in my life and now I have no control over even my mind!' Many times we also work in symptoms that we have read about—game-playing, attention-getting. Then comes fear that we really are that psychopathic . . .

"I've abused my child physically and emotionally. Now

I can talk in retrospect. I live in bits and pieces of those feelings now, but not the hell!"

The speaker is Jolly K., graduate of 35 foster homes, former abusive parent and founder of Parents Anonymous, Inc. of Los Angeles, California, a private organization of self-help groups that now has 1,500 members in 150 chapters in the United States and Canada.

Jolly is speaking to one of the many professional and lay citizen groups she addresses across the country each year in her role as director of programs for the organization—workers in state departments of social services and other agencies involved in the problems of child abuse and neglect, delegates to child welfare conferences, researchers and advisory groups.

Jolly founded her organization, first known as Mothers Anonymous, in 1970. It happened, as she tells it, in response to her bitter complaints to her therapist that there was no place for fearful abusers—and potential abusers—to turn for services. "Well, why don't you start one?" was his answer.

In 1974 Parents Anonymous received a grant from the Children's Bureau, OCD, to help establish additional chapters—by preparing and distributing materials on the organization and by providing technical assistance to communities wishing to form such groups, including the training of regional coordinators and local group leaders.

How is a P.A. chapter formed? Who are the parents who join such groups? Who leads them and what do they do in their meetings? To find out, CHILDREN TODAY discussed the following questions with Jolly K.

**CT:** *How do your members learn about Parents Anonymous?*

**Jolly K.:** Surprisingly, over 80 percent of our members come by themselves after hearing about us on television or radio programs or through newspaper stories and other published materials. The remaining 20 percent are referred through agency contacts, the courts, mental health practitioners and friends, neighbors or relatives.

**CT:** *How does a new chapter get started and where may a chapter meet?*

**Jolly K.:** New chapters are the direct result of someone's dedicated interest coupled with his or her willing-

52236

ness to work in developing the chapter. Chapters may be started by a parent with an abuse problem or a professional or a service agency wishing to help such parents. More specific information on starting a chapter is contained in our new *Chapter Development Manual*.\*

A chapter may meet in any non-threatening environment, such as a YMCA or YWCA, church, school or community center. We definitely must not meet in a city, county, state or Federal agency such as a Department of Public Welfare, Bureau of Adoptions or police department. Because feelings like "I have to have a clean house" and "Those kids better behave" can lead to potential pressure situations, we do not recommend that chapter meetings be held in private homes.

**CT:** *Are most of your members parents who have abused their children or are a good proportion mothers or fathers who fear they may? What percentage of members have had a child removed from their home?*

**Jolly K.:** The majority of P.A. parents have already experienced the anguish of having an active problem, but we are beginning to see more and more parents become involved prior to actual abusive behavior. By the end of 1976 we expect to have more concrete information on this. We also will be gathering data on the percentage of parents who have children in placement.

**CT:** *Who, besides parents, are involved in the chapters?*

**Jolly K.:** All chapters have a Sponsor and Chairperson. The sponsor should be a professional who has a profound respect for the self-help concept and understands group dynamics. Our sponsors include psychiatrists, psychologists, marriage and family counselors, social workers, ministers and others. If a sponsor is already employed by an agency that has an authoritative position in regard to parents with abuse problems, such as a protective service agency, he or she must work with P.A. autonomously, not as a representative of the agency.

The chairperson is always a parent. He or she may be the parent who helped start the group, or one of several who worked to form the chapter and who was later chosen informally to serve as chairperson by the other parents.

Many of our chapters also have various volunteers working with and for the chapter. Babysitters who care for the children during meeting times constitute the largest number of volunteers. We also have volunteers who help by providing transportation, hanging P.A. posters, circulating P.A. literature, making public contacts on our behalf and raising funds.

**CT:** *What is the relationship between a P.A. chapter and the national organization?*

**Jolly K.:** The National Office is committed to provide chapters with the support necessary to start and maintain a P.A. chapter. This is accomplished primarily by providing literature, public exposure, technical assistance and con-

sultation. An individual chapter is autonomous in most things; however, each is part of an overall national movement and receives support from the National Office. The main benefit, of course, is that there is strength, encouragement and unity in numbers, so that no one chapter is left with the overwhelming sense of responsibility, of "having to do it all by themselves."

**CT:** *Can you tell us something about what happens at a meeting?*

**Jolly K.:** Meetings begin and take shape in many different ways. Sometimes they start by someone saying, in response to the body language of a member, "Hey, what's happening?" Other times it begins by picking up on a problem a member was discussing at the last meeting or by asking for follow-up on a phone crisis call.

If I were at a meeting of a new group I might say, "Look, we're meeting here for a purpose—we're here to talk about what's churning inside us. Let's do something now to stop this behavior." We'd exchange telephone numbers and addresses and begin to form a lot of support contact.

I remember one meeting when a member, Lenny, was sitting on the couch, sharing with us how "down" she felt. Questioned many times as to the whys and wherefores, Lenny answered by saying, "I don't know," "I'm so confused" and "Stop badgering me." All the while she was quietly crying. She appeared so vulnerable, so young at that moment and most of all, so very needy.

I reached out, put my arms around her, practically putting her into my lap as if she were a lonely, lost child. At this, Lenny cried openly, much in the same way that a hurt, pained child cries. We as a group then knew, and verbally discussed the fact, that there are times when our need for nurturing exceeds our need to know the whys and wherefores. We also found out that when this overwhelming need is fulfilled—for Lenny it was within a half an hour's time—we can then turn our attention and response to the realities of our daily situations. Most of all, we learned that we can ask for inner fulfillment, that some others will respond with positive methods to help, and that we are not bad, unloveable people.

Another typical moment came at a meeting when Joel told other members: "I did it! Last week," she said, "I got so teed off at my son!" (He is five). "But instead of abusing him I squashed the milk carton I was holding until the milk went all over the place . . . I released my anger in a more positive way and it worked. Now I know I can do other things besides being abusive when I'm uptight."

Sure, the members laughed, but most important, we learned. Joel had shown us that a potential abusive situation can be averted, that we can be non-abusive regardless of how uptight we are! Call these heavy times or light times in a meeting. More than anything else, we in P.A. call the meetings "our time." The times with Lenny and Joel were very real moments in Parents Anonymous.

**CT:** How do members support one another between meetings and in emergencies?

**Jolly K.:** My last answer illustrated support but also a lot of caring. Suppose Joel had not squashed the milk carton. Alternate ways to release angry feelings include calling another member and releasing the feelings over the phone. Joel could also have asked another member to care for her boy until she "pulled it together," or she could have asked to have someone care for her (meaning stay with her) for a while.

**CT:** Is P.A. the sole source of help for most of the parents involved, or are some also receiving treatment or therapy through another source? And is therapy suggested and/or provided with the guidance of P.A.? For example, do some chapters use the services of professionals, such as psychiatrists, etc?

**Jolly K.:** Many of our members are receiving services other than P.A. and, yes, P.A. supports and suggests other therapy alternatives. On an as-needed basis we utilize the advice and input of professionals other than our chapter sponsor.

**CT:** Do many parents drop out of the program? And if so, for what reasons?

**Jolly K.:** Some members drop out after realizing that a group situation isn't their cup of tea. Others find P.A. uncomfortable for them. Also, some drop out by choosing to use other treatment resources.

**CT:** Have you found that there are certain kinds of parents with whom P.A. cannot work successfully? Are you able to guide them to other help?

**Jolly K.:** We've not found "certain kinds" of parents that we're not able to work with. We have found that some people find our program to be less successful for them. Again, we're not the "cup of tea" that they find comforting. When we are made aware of this, yes, we usually are able to guide them to other helping resources.

We have also found that persons who are acutely mentally ill and who come to a P.A. meeting may find that the group can't offer them the comprehensive services they need. It may also be that the group feels it is not prepared to deal with the behavior that may arise from their illness. In such cases the group, with the assistance of the sponsor, is able to refer the person to a more appropriate source.

**CT:** What is the rate of recidivism for those who attend meetings? Do you follow up former members?

**Jolly K.:** Recidivism has been very, very low. In the five years of the program's existence, we know of only two incidents which resulted in a child's hospitalization. That's not to say all is sweetness and roses and that our members have become "instant Pollyannas." It is to say that life- or limb-threatening abuse has been vastly reduced.

No, we do not do a formal follow-up on former members.

**CT:** Do you feel that members of P.A., who have voluntarily sought help, are typical of most abusive parents?

**Jolly K.:** Yes . . . emphatically, yes. We are seeing much the same, and then some, of the parents so often described in the available literature and research studies. We are seeing the very withdrawn, the very aggressive, the isolationist, the uptight, the psychotic . . . in short, we are seeing human beings displaying a lot of different "typical human traits."

**CT:** How many members meet in an average group and how long do most parents remain members?

**Jolly K.:** Average group size is between six to 10 members, with most members staying in for one or more years.

**CT:** What is the percentage of men to women in your groups?

**Jolly K.:** Too small a percentage. The average among the groups would probably be 25 to 30 percent men. Confirmed percentages are not currently available.

**CT:** Do both parents in an abusive family usually attend meetings? And what have you found the role of the non-abusing (passive) parent to be?

**Jolly K.:** No. Again, this is not one of our most successfully realized objectives. Incidentally, we've found the passive parent to be not so darn passive as people think. We know that a whole lot of "behind the scenes setting of the stage" is going on and contributing to the activeness of the active abusing parent.

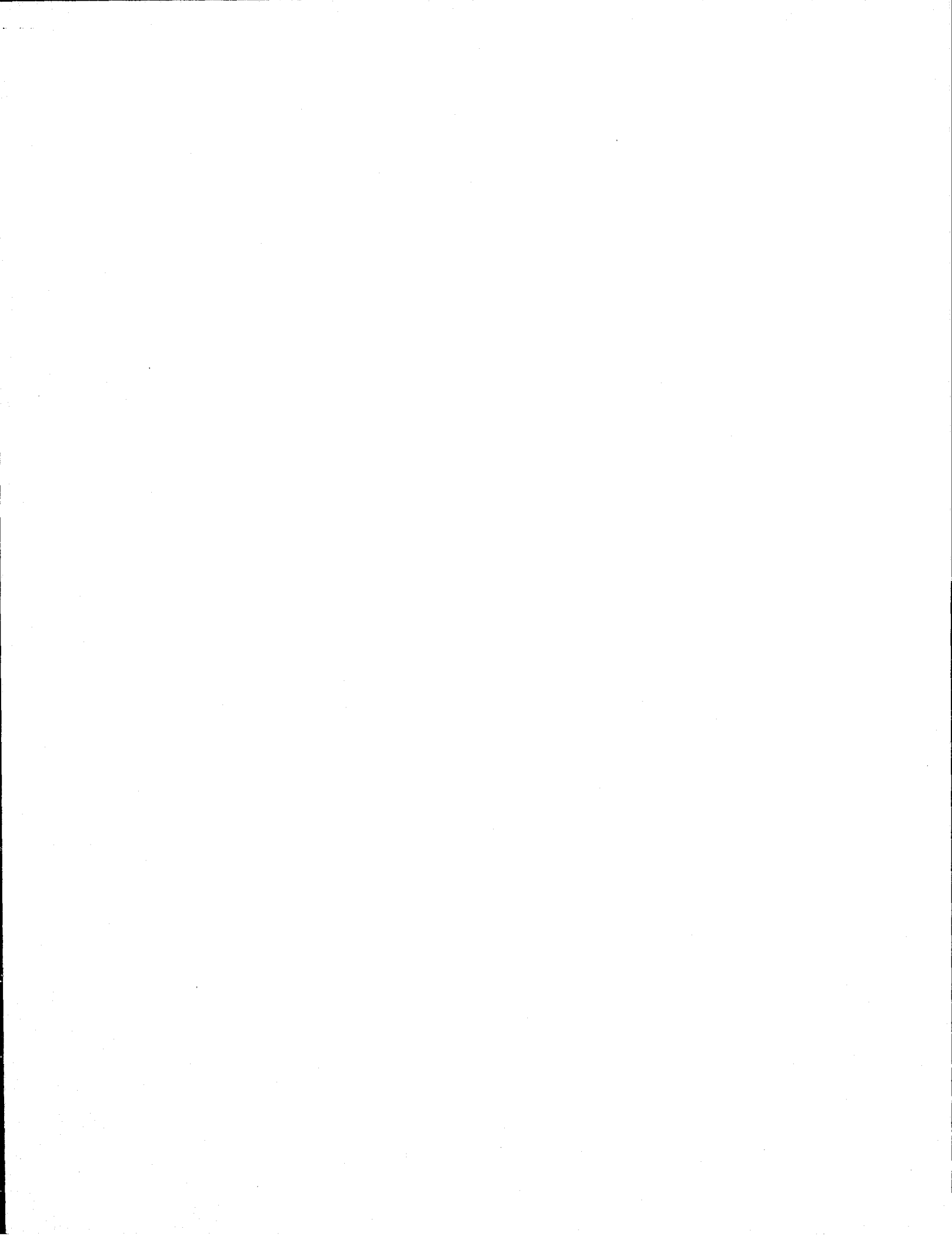
**CT:** Is dependency on the P.A. group a problem for members who must leave for one or another reason? Is any follow-up provided for those who do move away?

**Jolly K.:** Dependency can be and is a problem when a member leaves the group. But then the P.A. program is based on the premise that we, as members, will work towards resolving our problems, including how to handle relationships that are broken. The only follow-up provided is whatever is asked for or through the suggestion that a departing parent get involved with a chapter in the city he or she is moving to. If none exists, parents are encouraged to start one.

**CT:** What action is taken if the group learns that a member has committed an abusive act or fears that he will?

**Jolly K.:** Group peer pressure, group commitment to work extra hard with the parent and, as an extreme last resort, if P.A. doesn't work and the parent doesn't stop, then with or without the parent's agreement other people will be asked to intervene and provide services that will guarantee the safety of the child or children and the parent.

\* A copy of *Chapter Development Manual* and other material produced by Parents Anonymous, including a general information flyer on child abuse, are available from Parents Anonymous, 2930 W. Imperial Highway, Suite 332, Inglewood, California 90303.



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