

**Address to Corporate Area Family Court's  
Parenting Seminar**

**By**

**Senator the Hon. Dorothy Lightbourne, Q.C.,**

**Attorney-General & Minister of Justice.**

**Friday, November 21, 2008 at 9:15 a.m.**

**Topic: "Helping to curb violence against our children"**

**Introduction**

1. It is both fitting and timely for the Family Court to be repeating its Parenting Seminar this year. This Seminar comes at a time when we are experiencing an increase in the incidents of crime against children.
2. The seriousness of the problem is shown by the statistics. The report from the police issued at the beginning of November, show that since January 1, 2008, **73 children** have been murdered. In 2007 the number was **52** and in 2006, it was **51**.
3. This year's figures show an increase of almost 70 percent over 2006.
4. Since January 1, 2008, there have been 383 **cases of carnal abuse** reported to the police; in 2007, the figure was **363** and in 2006 it was **368**.
5. As alarming as the figures I have given are, it does not end there. Violence against children takes many different forms. What we have not

been able to capture sufficiently is the incidents of physical and, often times, verbal abuse meted out to children in their own households. This too is a form of violence and a very serious form of violence as to how it affects the emotional and psychological development of our children.

6. We know that flogging and other forms of physical punishment are deeply rooted in the Jamaican society. There are many parents, and we have heard them, who threaten to “murder” their children, even two-year-olds, when they are really just behaving as normal two-year-olds will behave.
7. This form of abuse cuts across all social classes and is often perpetrated by those who are expected to protect our children – which is parents and family members.
8. In December, 2007, the Saturday Gleaner, reported a case where the police in St. Thomas rescued, a naked eight-year-old girl who was tethered by the neck like an animal, from a hole in the ground near her mother’s house. I don’t know how many people remembered that
9. The mother was subsequently charged with cruelty to the child, under the Child Care and Protection Act.
10. Every form of violence against children is an infringement on their rights as human beings and as young citizens of this country. Additionally, every violent act inflicted on our children has negative consequences for the future of our country.

11. As Dr. Maureen Samms-Vaughn in her book *The Jamaican Pre-School Child: The Status of Early Childhood Development in Jamaica*, puts it:

**“...family violence and child abuse are associated with later deviant behaviour and poor academic outcomes...regardless of the circumstances surrounding violence, whether children are witnesses or victims, exposure to violence is associated with psychological symptoms and abnormal socio-emotional and cognitive development”.**

12. Irrespective of the form that violence towards our children takes, the result is the same - emotional scars that for many years remain with them and, sometimes, never go away.
13. The fight to rescue our nation must therefore begin with the rescuing of our children from violence. As a nation, we need to unite and act with urgency to reverse this unacceptable trend.

### **The Role of The Ministry of Justice and other Groups**

14. Now when we speak of justice, this is also applicable to our children. The law must seek to protect them as they protect any other class of victims.
15. To this end, the Ministry of Justice is taking steps to introduce a Sexual Offences Bill, this Bill at the moment is being looked at by the Legislation Committee, and that Bill will include a Sexual Offenders Registry, which is the important thing, there has been a call for this for sometime.

16. Persons are convicted of sexual offences and they serve their sentences and they go away but they go back because often there's a profile of such persons, they continue to commit and we don't know.
17. So you take them into your homes, you rent accommodation to them so this Bill will introduce a Sexual offenders Registry so that the State can keep a record of all convicted sexual offenders.
18. And they will be obliged when they change addresses or move that we know where they are, and this will I am sure will go some way towards protecting not only Jamaicans as a whole but in particular our children.
19. We are also seeking to include in the Sexual Offenders Bill, provisions for a registry of sexual offenders that will ensure that the state keeps a record of all convicted sexual offenders.
20. In the past, in punishing sexual offences the focus has mainly been on offences committed against girls with less emphasis on those against boys. This Bill, we are seeking to change that to make more provisions to address sexual assaults against boys as well...
21. An important arm of the Ministry of Justice is the Victims' Support Unit (VSU). It is currently seeking to attract more volunteers as it expands its role in assisting victims to deal with abuse.
22. We are in the process of strengthening the liaison between the Police and the VSU to provide more immediate psychological and social support for victims of crime and violence.

23. The VSU and the Ministry of Justice are represented on the Prime Minister's Task force on Child Abuse Prevention you have heard of that, I'm sure it has been in the news. The Task Force is intended to bring an integrated approach to dealing with the matter of child abuse prevention. All child related organizations including the – Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of National Security, Ministry of Information, Local Government Department, Children's Advocacy and the Child Development Agency - are all working together in partnership to find creative and most effective ways of preventing our children from being abused.
24. As you have heard a dedicated line, 211 line, is being established to the Children's Registry and to be a 24-hour line that all cases of abuse be reported there and be acted upon.
25. A The Ministry of Justice reaffirms its commitment to implementing the required policies and recommendations that will reduce/minimize the incidents of child abuse and violence. In that regard I now have a draft Bill it is titled "Child Pornography Prevention Bill, that Bill has been circulated to stakeholders, such as Children's Advocate, Child Development Agency. This will criminalize the production and possession of Child pornography and related matters, very important piece of legislation.
26. I am waiting on comments from stakeholders because we don't know it all, so we need your input, you are out there, you are in the field and once the comments are in this Bill will also go to Legislation Committee and introduced to Parliament.

27. In fact I am hoping to have a meeting of the Legislation Committee tomorrow so we can get it into Parliament before the end of this month and certainly before the end of this year.

### **The role of Parents**

28. In addition to what is being done by government there are also things that you as parents can do to detect and prevent violence against our children.
29. The process must first begin with you, in your homes. Love your children and treat them with respect.
30. So often we blame, shame, accuse, ridicule and belittle our children in the mistaken belief that we are disciplining them. This is abuse, not discipline. It is important that you appreciate the difference - one is about teaching right from wrong, positive values etc., while the other results in fear, pain, shame, degradation and humiliation.
31. Children need discipline, but when the methods of disciplining becomes violent then the society must raise the “red flag” against such acts. Other parents, neighbours, the entire community must raise their voices in disapproval of such abuse. Reporting of abuse, and crime and violence are critical to addressing and eliminating the scourge of child abuse and violence against children.
32. The next thing that as parents you must do is to be more observant about your children. Listen to them, take a greater interest in the things that concern them. Like adults, children have views, fears and problems

and need to share these with persons they can trust. And who better than their parents?

33. By developing a close relationship with your children you are more likely to detect sudden changes in attitudes such as shyness, fear, being unusually aggressive or passive behaviour, or withdrawal. You may be able to identify signs of unhappiness or sadness or fear of anything or of anyone.
34. Even physical examination of your children is important. Develop the habit of looking at your children more closely, to see whether they have any unexplained bruises, cuts, swellings on their bodies.
35. In this way you can detect signs of abuse in your children and possibly prevent any form of violence which is likely to come their way.
36. The blessings of this Information Age has also come with it curses because our children are vulnerable to Internet predators, and run the risk of child abuse on-line. This Child Pornography Prevention Act is intending to deal with quite a lot of the Pornography and the degrading sexual images that are put on the Internet.
37. Be wary and work with your children when you see them on the computer, show an interest, so you can see, be careful if you walk in and they suddenly flip the computer and go to something else. These are little warning signs.
38. We have to be wary for our children seem to spend long hours on-line, especially at nights. Be on your guard if there is pornography on your child's computer or if your child is getting phone calls or e-mail from

persons you do not know; or if they make calls to numbers you do not recognize.

39. We can do it in a friendly way, without them feeling you are watching them, you do it as if you are interested, and I want to join with what you are doing. I am not a parent but I do have two nieces and a nephew, and really I suppose I am a second mother.
40. To those parents who find themselves facing emotional problems, or fear that their children may also have similar problems, my advice to you is to seek counselling and do not be afraid to do so, whether it is from a relative, a friend, a neighbour, a teacher, an officer of the court or a pastor, all these parents are here to help us.
41. Counselling allows you to cope better in difficult situations. It provides you with tools to improve your communication skills and your relationships with your children and your partners. It allows you to express your feelings more clearly and helps you to come to terms with new or past experiences.

## **Conclusion**

42. As I have stated at the beginning of this presentation, there is now more than ever and urgent need to address the issues affecting our children, in particular the issue of violence.

43. I concur with the view that, no violence against children is justifiable and further that all violence against children is preventable. The achievement of this prevention requires a concerted effort on the part of the state, citizens, parents and civil society.
44. As is often said, 'children are our future' and they have an unqualified right to be protected so that they can achieve their full potential and make their contribution to this society.
45. That is why the Corporate Area Family Court is putting on this very useful Parenting Seminar for parents and others to understand and appreciate the urgent need to eliminate violence and abuse against children.
46. I commend the staff of the Family Court under the leadership of Your Honour, Mrs. Primo-Griffith, for hosting this seminar, which will ultimately help to improve the quality of parenting in Jamaica.
47. Again I wish to emphasize the Ministry of Justice's commitment to providing enabling legislation to address this issue.
48. It is with great pleasure that I declare this seminar open, I wish I could be a part of it, and I wish for you a very successful seminar.

Thank you again.

**END**