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Children and Adolescents

Tell me and I may forget;
Explain to me and I may remember;
Involve me, and I will understand.
— *Anonymous*

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After a serious suicide attempt, nine-year-old "Jessica" was admitted to hospital for in-patient psychiatric treatment. She had many problems. Besides feeling that her life was not worth living, she was failing in school, getting into fights with classmates, stealing, and trying to cope with the fact that her parents had filed for divorce three months before. Jessica was crying out for help long before she came to the attention of the emergency department of the hospital in her community. Both her parents cared about her, but they never really sensed the depth of Jessica's inner turmoil. Neither did her teachers.

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Many people think that childhood and adolescence are "the best years of your life," characterized by carefree living with no serious responsibilities to weigh you down. The reality can be very different. Kids today face pressures that sometimes overwhelm them, delaying their development and leaving them unable to reach their potential in later life. Their challenges may range from attention and learning problems to physical or sexual abuse, eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, depression, anxiety, and family discord — to name only a few.

Most people don't think of nine-year-old children as wanting to die. But even mild emotional problems, left untreated, can grow and reach into the teen and young adult years, significantly crippling anyone's ability to become the person God created them to be. Prevention, assessment, and counselling are all effective means for enabling tomorrow's generation to reach their full potential. The church plays an important role in all three of these areas; pastoral care for children and youth is an important Christian ministry [Cheryl Noble, *IFL Reflections*, Spring 1999, Institute of Family Living].

"For the good of the child"

A therapy centre such as the Institute of Family Living gets many referrals of children and adolescents from clergy, doctors, schools, social workers, and parents. My colleague Dr. Cheryl Noble, a clinical psychologist specializing in children and youth, describes her approach with Jessica and others.

> The current emphasis on the best interest of the child greatly influences how I work with young clients. My approach to children and youth can be described as collaborative and problem-solving. Everyone has problems in life. However, like some adults, many young persons define their whole existence by their problem. They may describe themselves with a label such as ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder], "sad," "learning-disabled," "nervous," or even "a kid from a broken family" [Cheryl Noble, *IFL Reflections*, Spring 1999, Institute of Family Living].

A fifteen-year-old boy was referred for therapy for depression and underachievement in school. He told Cheryl, "There's no use talking to my school or my parents. What can they do? I'm

ADD and nobody is going to do anything anyway." This young person was defining himself by a diagnosis that, for him, became his identity. He neglected to say, however, that he wrote songs, or that he could play any musical instrument that he picked up, and his mother added that he could be very persuasive in his dealings with people. Cheryl worked together with him to re-frame his life story. By expanding on areas of his life that were already successful, he was eventually able to see that he was much more than just "ADD" or "broken."

Teachers may see a young person as capable of achieving well, but his or her performance doesn't measure up. No two children learn identically. Some need the school curriculum adapted to meet their needs, and others need expectations (their own or those of the adults in their lives) adjusted to be more realistic. Sometimes young people don't see themselves as having a problem. They claim that their parents and school are the ones with the problem. When Cheryl asked an eight-year-old why her parents had brought her to see her, she stated, "There's nothing wrong with me. Everybody keeps bugging me." The task, as she saw it, was how to get everybody off her back. So together they explored actions she could take that might lead to this result.

Parents and teachers, youth leaders and coaches, are invaluable resources in helping a child acquire the skills he or she needs for long-term adaptation to life, as opposed to short-term Band-Aid solutions. Frequently, a problem-solving approach with young people involves teaching coping strategies to deal with similar issues that may arise in the future. While work with an individual is often indicated, equally often a young person's environment may need restructuring so that the problem does not perpetuate itself. For example, if a child becomes explosive during transitional times, the environment might be restructured

to offset potential explosive behaviour [Cheryl Noble, *IFL Reflections,* Spring 1999, Institute of Family Living].

Children, family, and stress

This topic has been addressed in other chapters in this book, but it is important to emphasize that children do indeed experience stress and stress-related illnesses and emotional meltdowns. Because not everyone is created with the same hard- wiring in the brain, some children feel overwhelmed more easily than do others. Here, accommodation may be the answer. One child may need more sleep than another, or may need to eat small frequent meals rather than the traditional three square meals a day, or may need to receive instructions one at a time. These small, achievable changes in a child's environment can reduce stress for the entire family.

Sometimes what we regard as abnormal behavioural or emotional expression is the most adaptive way that a child or youth can deal with an abnormal situation. Treating the child as if they were a label and nothing more is counter-productive. Working with a child of any age requires an integrative approach — involving the family and siblings, parents, grandparents, and friends, as well as the school system. The behaviour of children and youth needs to be seen in the context of the whole system in which they are involved — family, school, friendship networks, extracurricular activities, and church.

During times of profound stress in a child's life, a faith community can play a healing and restorative role by providing unconditional love and acceptance, however challenging this may be. As was mentioned in the case of the Smith-Lam family (in chapter 3), the son in prison was visited by his church's youth

From Parent to Child

I gave you life,
　　but cannot live it for you.
I can teach you things,
　　　but I cannot make you learn.
I can give you directions,
　　　but I cannot be there to lead you.
I can allow you freedom,
　　　but I cannot account for it.
I can take you to church,
　　　but I cannot make you believe.
I can teach you right from wrong,
　　　but I cannot always decide for you.
I can buy you beautiful clothes,
but I cannot make you beautiful inside.

I can offer you advice,
　　　but I cannot accept it for you.
I can give you love,
　　　but I cannot force it upon you.
I can teach you to share,
　　　but I cannot make you unselfish.
I can teach you to respect,
　　　but I cannot force you to show honour.
I can advise you about friends,
　　　but I cannot choose them for you.
I can warn you about drugs,
　　　but I can't prevent you from using them.
I can tell you about lofty goals,
　　　but I cannot achieve them for you.
I can teach you about kindness,
　　　but I cannot force you to be gracious.
I can warn you about sins,
　　　but I cannot make your morals.
I can pray for you,
　　　but I cannot make you walk with God.
　　　　　　　　　　— Anonymous

leader, who played a critical role in the youth's subsequent proba-
tion and significant life changes, which included accepting his
newly reconfigured family system.

Positive parenting

There have been many how-to books written about parenting.
Some stress the authority of the parent; others stress the needs of
children. One author who has sought to find a balance between
these sometimes competing demands is Barbara Coloroso. In her
1994 book *Kids Are Worth It!* she outlines six critical life messages
inherent in good parenting:

- I trust you.
- I believe in you.
- I know you can handle this.
- You are listened to.
- You are cared for.
- You are very important to me.

The importance of emotional attachment and social integra-
tion are acknowledged in these six life messages. The relationship
of the child to himself or herself (and thus the need for learning
autonomy), and the relationship of the child to another (and
thus the need for love, trust, and belonging) are foundational to
emotional and interpersonal health. For optimal development,
children need bonds of attachment with a warm and caring
parent figure, clear and consistent household structure, timely
comforting in a responsive environment, and the stimulation of
language and thinking.

We now know that children have various ways of exploring
and relating to the world. Whether they are "smart" in the area
of nature, words, numbers, pictures, music, body, other people,

or themselves, children have different gifts, and it is the responsibility of the adults in their lives to call forth these gifts. The work of Dr. Howard Gardiner at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education's "Project Zero" shows that all these "multiple intelligences" need to be nurtured and encouraged.

Thomas Armstrong elaborates on the work of Gardiner and helps parents, teachers, child care and youth workers to explore the multiple intelligences of children with whom they are involved. He encourages adults to develop a list of simple activities that involve a child's different intelligences — for example, make up a story (word smart), do a math problem (number smart), draw a horse (picture smart), sing a song (music smart), do a cartwheel (body smart), share something you really like about yourself (self smart), tell a friend something you really like about him or her (people smart), find a bird outside and watch where it flies (nature smart) [Thomas Armstrong, *In Their Own Way,* p. 227].

Jesus paid a great deal of attention to children, and the gospels are full of instances of Jesus relating to children, or citing them as role models. In the gospel of Luke, for example, there are several instances of Jesus healing children of parents who sought his help (the widow's son at Nain, Luke 7:11–17; the daughter of Jairus, Luke 8:40–56; a man's epileptic son, Luke 9:37–43), and he points to a child to illustrate the reign of God to his disciples who were jostling for preferential position.

> An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest" [Luke 9:46–48].

Raising children is a community task that requires the resources of parents, grandparents, godparents, aunts and uncles, teachers, youth workers, coaches, and neighbours. Occasionally, counsellors and therapists are needed to help for a time also. We are all called to welcome the child and to practise generous hospitality to the children who cross our path.

Here is an exercise to help us think about our own childhood and the children now in our lives:

- *Think of the significant people in your childhood.*
  Who helped you to experience a sense of joy?
  Who helped you to know yourself and value yourself?
  Who affirmed your gifts and talents?
- *Think of the number of roles you now play in various children's lives.*
  What gives you the greatest joy as you engage in their lives?
  How do you help them to come to accept themselves?

We need to give our children *roots* and *wings*. *Roots* to be grounded in relationship, in a solid sense of self, in religious faith, and in a worldview that will help them to stand strong in the face of trial and suffering. *Wings* to fly, to explore, to discover, to develop a sense of interdependence and an awareness of their unique giftedness. With both roots and wings, children can grow into a true capacity for interdependence, to be a "self in community." Here are some further questions we can ask ourselves about our relationship with the children in our lives.

- What are children telling you that you are resisting hearing?
- When are you most "present" to them, and not preoccupied or too busy to see and hear their needs?
- Do you allow them to ask for what they want, to find their

own "voice"? Or do they have to depend on you for permission to even ask?

- How do you give them the freedom to feel and to express their own feelings?
- Do you allow your children to take risks, to learn from their mistakes? Or do you teach them to "play safe" and perhaps then to fear failure?
- Do you open up, or shut down, children's natural curiosity and sense of adventure?

The societal picture

All of us who take the beautiful risk of loving and caring for children know that no one has all the right answers, and that we need help to encourage children to grow and mature into the people that God created them to be. So we are confronted with the dilemma of how to help children to remain faithful to God and to others, when all around them they see generations of broken relationships, either in their own or their friends' families, and a satiated society lacking in enduring connections.

In his paper entitled *40 Years of Evolution in Families* [May 2003], Robert Glossop, executive director of the Vanier Institute of the Family, described the scope of the changes that have occurred in family life over the last forty years. These changes have profoundly affected the lives of children in our society. As Glossop reports, citing Statistics Canada, there were ten times as many divorces in 2003 as in 1963. "And, of course, divorce rates now underestimate the number of conjugal dissolutions because you have to be married before you can get divorced. Here in Canada 16% of all couples are living common-law ... and in Quebec 29.8% of couples are living common-law."

In fact, 13% of children from birth to age fourteen are living with parents who are not married. "In comparison to forty years ago when well under 10% of children were born to unmarried mothers, 50% of children born in Quebec and 33% of those born in the other provinces are born to women who are not married." Glossop adds the significant fact that the majority of these newborns of unmarried parents go home from the hospital with both a mother and a father. Also he describes the common-law unions in Quebec as "being more stable over time than elsewhere."

The statistical record tells us that one in five Canadian children do not live with two parents and, of these, more than 80% live with a lone-parent mother. Further, 12% of all families are stepfamilies. Five out of ten include only the biological children of the mother. Four out of ten stepfamilies are blended and include children of two separate conjugal unions. Looking at the overall picture, we see that a relatively large percentage of children is going to experience the separation or divorce of their biological parents, perhaps as high as 40% to 45%. Most of these will live in a lone-parent family for a period of time. And most of these will experience an episode of poverty. Some will find themselves in a stepfamily home.

"Separation and divorce and all the changes they bring are hard on kids — terribly hard on kids. Most survive and do well. Some do not. None will be untouched by the experience. There are, indeed, long-term consequences in terms of their emotional health, academic achievement, and subsequent family relationships. If children could vote here, divorce might, as Judith Wallerstein once suggested, be illegal. [But it is encouraging that] the large majority of divorces in Canada are handled outside the courts and in fact parents are able to act in the best interests of their children" [Robert Glossop, *40 Years of Evolution in Families*].

The church and family reconfiguration

When we look at the essence of family life — the structure, function, and feelings — we see that children are profoundly affected in all three ways by the consumer culture of expressive individualism, whose values of impermanence are implicitly taught to children. Teens are exposed to pornography on the Internet, to consumer dating on shows such as *Bachelor,* to music videos that promote the consumption of sex, relationships, and things.

Into this cultural context our faith speaks a word of hope and consistency — that God is love, that forgiveness and mercy are foundational values in the journey of following Christ, and that community is to be treasured. Parenting is a calling from God; children are a gift. This message must be communicated to our children as they face the dislocations of family breakup and parental separations. Too often they feel caught in the middle, or are vulnerable to self-rejection or to feeling responsible for their parents (role reversal).

When new parental unions and family reconfigurations occur, the church can be a supportive community, as children and youth face the daunting prospect of including a new step-parent into their family circle, and often the addition of stepsiblings. Certainly trust and friendship do not happen instantly but must be carefully cultivated. Again, the community of the church can be a safe place, and a trusted youth leader can be a major support in listening to the confusion and hurts and fears of a young person going through such a major transition.

Parents in successful stepfamilies have realistic expectations and are comfortable in knowing that their stepfamily will always be different from a biological family unit. Both parents and children feel more comfortable when they recognize that not all relationships are equally close. Research on stepfamilies tells us that the quality of the step-parent/stepchild relationship is an

The Blended Family Life Cycle

Stage: End of previous partnership
- Establishing emotional closure; grieving the losses.
- Examining patterns of family of origin and previous relationships.
- Beginning the children's emotional separation from unified parental system; reconfiguring parental custody/access.

Stage: Courtship
- "Dating"; learning to trust again in an intimate relationship. Children growing to know new partner (and his/her children).
- Establishing clear boundaries of who is in authority roles; children maintaining old loyalties while establishing new ties.

Stage: Getting married
- Establishing an intimate living relationship with a spouse. Further development of the emotional patterns of children relating to first parent while establishing new relationship(s) with parent's partner in home(s).

Stage: Parenting
- Opening the family to include new members; possible birth of new child(ren) to couple.
- Children coming and going from family unit.
- Negotiating the parenting roles.

Stage: Living with adolescents
- Increasing the flexibility of the family boundaries to allow the adolescent(s) to move in and out of the family system.

Stage: Launching children; "empty nest" phase
- Accepting the multitude of exits from, and new entries into, the family system.
- Adjusting to the ending of parenting roles.

Stage: Retirement
- Adjusting to the ending of wage-earning roles. Developing new relationships with adult children, their partners, grandchildren, and each other.

Stage: Old age
- Dealing with lessening abilities and greater dependence on others, and with losses of friends, family members, and eventually each other.

Adapted by Diane Marshall from Ed Bader, "Working with Families," *Australian Family Physician,* April 1990.

important determinant of overall stepfamily happiness. Because the solid foundation of early childhood bonding experiences is lacking, the step-parent/stepchild bond may be particularly vulnerable to family stress.

Stepfamily research suggests that both husbands and wives generally feel closer to their own children than they do to their stepchildren. So in times of stress, parents are much more likely to side with their own children, and in turn, their children tend to reciprocate by showing appreciation and affection toward them, thereby distancing the step-parent. Because stepchildren and step-parents do not have the same history, a "more deliberate effort from both parties may be required to build and maintain a congenial relationship" [Melody Preece, "When Lone Parents Marry," *Transitions,* Winter 2003–2004].

Because stepfamilies are becoming more common, our churches need to look at positive ways to support and foster family life amid the complexities of modern culture. Marriage preparation is different for first-time marrying couples than it is for remarrying couples. In the latter case, professional or informal counselling that explores the previous marital history, custody and access issues around children, and personal learnings through the breakup, may be an important prerequisite to the new marriage.

And because communication skills, so needed in family life, may be more acute in stepfamily situations, a church designing its education program would do well to consider groups for step-parents separate from those for parents of intact families. Clergy, Sunday school teachers, and youth workers do well to be aware of the complexities of families with whom they work, and the specific needs of children and youth they serve.

Churches also need to be very sensitive to the realities of sole-parent families. Not only are such families likely to have had a major adjustment in their income and possibly a loss of the family home; but also most frequently, as Statistics Canada figures show, they are mother-led families bereft of fathers and of healthy male influence in the lives of their children. Programs that include child care or financial help for babysitting costs enable single mothers to participate in church life and to experience the encouragement and friendship that help to sustain them in their often lonely and difficult task of parenting their children.

Too often sole mothers do not get breaks from work and family, because of the lack of trustworthy childcare and adequate financial resources to afford it. Children in such homes do not receive the valuable input of others in their upbringing. "Adoptive" grandparents or "big brothers" can go a long way toward enriching the life of a child or youth who is living in a mother-led family.

Children, youth, and violence

In 2003, Family Service Canada and the Canadian Council on Social Development together conducted the first-ever national study to probe parental perceptions about the many forms of violence their children encounter. Over one thousand parents were surveyed, and focus groups were staged across the country. The results were summarized in a report entitled *Canadian Children's Exposure to Violence: What it Means for Parents.*

The study revealed that children are growing up in a world different from their parents, and that many parents have not grasped the scope of the problem. "They do not seem to recognize that their kids face a steady onslaught of aggressive images and incidents rather than simply isolated incidents; nor did parents seem to realize that the barrage of violence might have cumulative effects on their children," suggests Judi Varga-Toth, national programs manager at Family Service Canada.

> Studies on children's exposure to violence indicate that television, videos, movies and aggression at school (including bullying) can negatively affect their development in the short and the long term. The vast majority of parents in the study expressed some concern about their children's exposure to violence at school and through entertainment media such as television and music videos, and more than 50% also expressed some concern about violence in the community. But only 30% voiced concern about sibling aggression, which has been described as the most common form of family violence.
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> Despite highly publicized cases of so-called rink rage, where parents have assaulted or shouted obscenities at minor hockey officials, only 51% of parents expressed any concern about sport violence. In the focus groups, parents again cited the schoolyard and television as their primary concerns [*Let's Talk Families*, vol. 14, no. 3, October 2003].

Paul Roberts, a co-author of the national study, noted that some parents feel "almost helpless." This underscores one purpose of the study, which is to get parents to understand, and to seek to minimize the impact of, the aggression bombarding their children. One important step is for parents to discard their assumption that bullying is a normal part of growing up. Valuable resources — such as the Internet site www.bullying.org — are available to parents and teachers; and it is encouraging that many schools are actively developing effective anti-bullying programs, with the cooperation of parents.

Bill Belsey, founder of the bullying web site, notes that parents frequently send mixed signals to children about aggression, rationalizing that the media create an appetite for violence but that they are powerless to control their children's media habits. Many parents have no rules about what or how much television may be watched by their children. Studies have shown that more than 33% of parents use the TV rating system to help choose what programs their children may watch, but that only 36% of parents had installed filters on their Internet system

The co-authors of the recent study on parental attitudes to violence realized that a large proportion of parents do not feel comfortable with the role of censoring what their kids are exposed to. Nor do parents take a close enough look at the pressures associated with sports, which often produce aggressive behaviour in children.

It is commendable, in this regard, that the Canadian Hockey Association has started placing greater emphasis on parent education, and has taken steps to protect children through its "Speak Out" harassment and abuse prevention program. Speak Out encourages children to confide in a trusted adult whenever they feel uncomfortable about a situation, and requires coaches to attend a workshop offering them clear guidelines about not

only how to react to disclosures of abuse or harassment, but also how to prevent it.

For the groups behind the *Canadian Children's Exposure to Violence* study, the primary goal is to help Canadian parents recognize just how much violence their children encounter daily, and to challenge parental ignorance about the effects of desensitizing children to aggression, which then places them at risk for bullying or being bullied.

Assertive versus aggressive communication

Consider three basic interpersonal styles — aggressive, passive, and assertive.

- People who use the *aggressive* style of interacting attempt to get their own way through intimidation, with little concern for how the other person might be feeling. The advantage of this style is that you feel in control and won't be pushed around.
- People who use the *passive* style of interacting tend to let other people push them around, do not stand up for themselves, and can be coerced to behave in certain ways even when they disagree. The advantage of this style is that you feel you won't be rejected.
- People who use the *assertive* style of interacting are able to express their feelings and wishes directly and openly while still respecting the other. The advantage of this style is that you won't be pushed around and you won't push others around, and a deeper understanding will result.

Children need to be taught the skills of assertive communication. As parents, grandparents, teachers, or youth leaders we

can make inquiries that will help children and adolescents to understand themselves and then to communicate assertively. This might include open-ended questions such as:

- What do you want?
- What do you need right now?
- How do you feel about this?
- What bothers you?
- What is the problem?

Helping children to recognize their own needs, make them known, and express them clearly is a challenging task. It helps when adults can guide children to stick to *one issue at a time* and to request *small changes* that do not overwhelm the child and lead to discouragement. Using what we call *"I" statements* ("I feel hurt"), rather than *"you" statements* ("you are thoughtless"), allows a child or young person to hear another's feelings without being blamed in humiliating or shaming ways.

Ultimately, assertive communication in families improves the problem solving abilities of the family members and also builds a climate of cooperation and mutual understanding. Assertiveness is a method of communication that is based on, and values, respect and equality. It does not undermine parental authority, but it does empower people of all ages to hear one another and to respond to one another more empathically. It is a practical part of the living out of Paul's teaching in Ephesians 4:15, which instructs us to "speak truthfully in love," and in Colossians 3:15, which encourages us to "let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts."

Encouragement: Building another person's confidence and feelings of self-worth

- Encouragement is the process of *focusing on the assets and strengths* of other people in order to build their self-confidence and feelings of worth.
- Focus on what is good about the person or the situation. *See the positive.*
- Seek to accept people *as they are.* Don't make your love and acceptance dependent on their behaviour.
- *Respect others.* It will reinforce their self-respect.
- Let others know their worth. *Recognize improvement and effort,* not just accomplishment.
- *Give encouragement* for effort or improvement. It implies a spirit of cooperation.
- Reserve praise for outstanding accomplishment. It implies a spirit of competition.
- One of the most powerful forces in human relationships is expectations. We can influence a person's behaviour by *changing our expectations* of the person.
- Lack of faith in both adults and children helps them to *anticipate failure.*
- Standards that are too high invite failure and discouragement.
- Avoid using discouraging words and actions.
- Avoid tacking qualifiers to your words of encouragement. Don't give with one hand and take away with the other.
- The sounds of encouragement are *words that build feelings of adequacy*:
    – I like the way you handled that.
    – I know you can handle it.
    – I appreciate what you did.
    – It looks as if you worked very hard on that.
    – You're improving.
- Avoid competition; *focus on cooperation*.
- Be *generous* with your encouragement.

How the church can help

One of the most effective ways church communities can help parents, grandparents, children, and youth is to sponsor workshops on conflict resolution stressing non-violent ways of dealing with conflict. Church youth groups could address directly the issues of aggression in the media, and sponsor panels and discussions on topics such as sex and dating, music videos, sports, or the effect of violence in our culture. Such dialogue can help young people understand and become more aware of possessing or condoning attitudes and behaviours that violate others.

Training in non-violence is foundational to living out our Christian calling to be peacemakers. Church-sponsored parenting groups, lectures, and workshops can encourage parents to develop skills to be non-violent in the way they exercise authority. Frequently, parents are judged to be "bad" by their fellow churchgoers if they provide a lack of supervision, discipline, or affection, but seldom does the church address the bigger issue of parents' lack of time. Many Christian parents struggle with coordinating a work/family balance without adequate supports or effective tools to actually *be* parents. Community church-based programs that help beleaguered parents develop the necessary skills can go a long way to reduce family violence and to improve parent-child relationships.

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Parenting

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KidsProtect. A service of MedicAlert, this program offers a customized medical identification bracelet or necklet for your child with a 24-hour emergency hotline linked to their medical and personal records, immediately accessible to health care professionals in all emergencies. Also available for low-income families through the KidsProtect Assistance program. For more information, call 1-800-668-1507, or check out <www.kidsprotect.ca>.

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