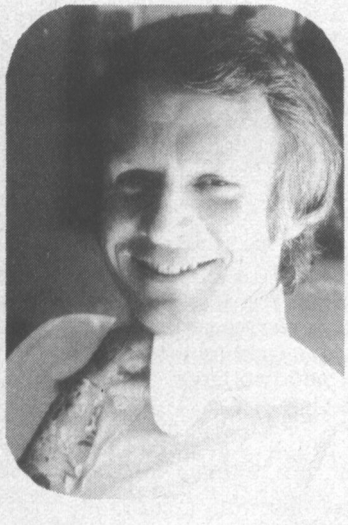


‘PARENTS ANONYMOUS’

Self Help for Child Abusers’

Parents Anonymous is a self help group formed in 1973 by Victorian parents who abused their children. Max Liddell interviews Gail, the Victorian President, to find out about this new service.



Max Liddell, MSW.
Assistant Director
Melbourne Family Care
Organization

Max: Gail, what is Parents Anonymous?

Gail: Parents Anonymous, or P.A. as we call it, is a group of parents — I stress parents because it isn't only for mothers — who have at some time abused their children, not necessarily physical abuse, in any of the 6 forms of abuse. We joined together and we decided that we should form a group to help one another and our children. This is basically what Parents Anonymous is.

Max: What are the 6 forms of child abuse that P.A. refers to?

Gail: The 6 forms of child abuse are — physical abuse, physical neglect, verbal abuse, emotional abuse, emotional neglect, sexual abuse.

Max: How do P.A. members help each other?

Gail: How do we help each other? Well, we've got a phone service which is a 24 hour phone service. Each one of us that is on the phone gives our number in and it's given to any person that rings in for help. They can ring at times of stress. They've got several numbers so that if they ring one number and can't get through they ring another number, the idea being they ring when they have . . . preferably before they have abused the child, if not then, after they have abused the child, because it's good to talk to someone and tell them what you've done. You don't feel quite so bad if they say to you "Oh yes, I think I would have done the same". You sit there and feel very bad and guilty yourself, so to talk to someone about it is very good for you, and it may stop you going back and abusing the child a second time.

Max: So that sometimes people telephone in before they abuse their child but fearing that they might do it?

Gail: This is so.

Max: And when you get such a call, what do you do?

Gail: Well, each one varies, naturally. You can't say there's a set pattern for what you do when a person rings. You can't say "I do such and such". It just has to be what happens when that particular person rings. You may get someone who has physically abused their child, in which case you would ask them if

the child was alright and if the child was conscious, where the child was, what they have done to the child. Whereas if they had just verbally abused the child, you'd still ask if the child was alright because sometimes they can verbally abuse the child and physically abuse at the same time and not realize it, but you wouldn't be quite so worried about the child if it was just a verbal abuse. You would try and find out what caused the abuse.

Advice

Max: Gail, if you receive a call from a parent who has physically abused their child, what sort of advice do you give them?

Gail: Well, it depends on what sort of physical abuse they've inflicted on their child at the particular time. You would try and find out if the child is very badly in need of hospitalization perhaps, or in need of medical care even. You would sort of ask the mother what they'd done and how bad the child was, then you would quickly try and work out whether it needed you to go there or whether it needed perhaps someone who was a bit closer with a car that could take the child to the nearest medical centre, or if need be, to the nearest hospital. You then say to the mother "Now look, calm down, it can't be as bad as all that, let's find out what caused it". If it's a mother that already comes to one of our group meetings, you suggest that she definitely comes to the next group meeting. If it's a new mother who rings in you tell her about the group meetings, you try to get her to agree to come to the group meeting and follow it up with a visit if possible.

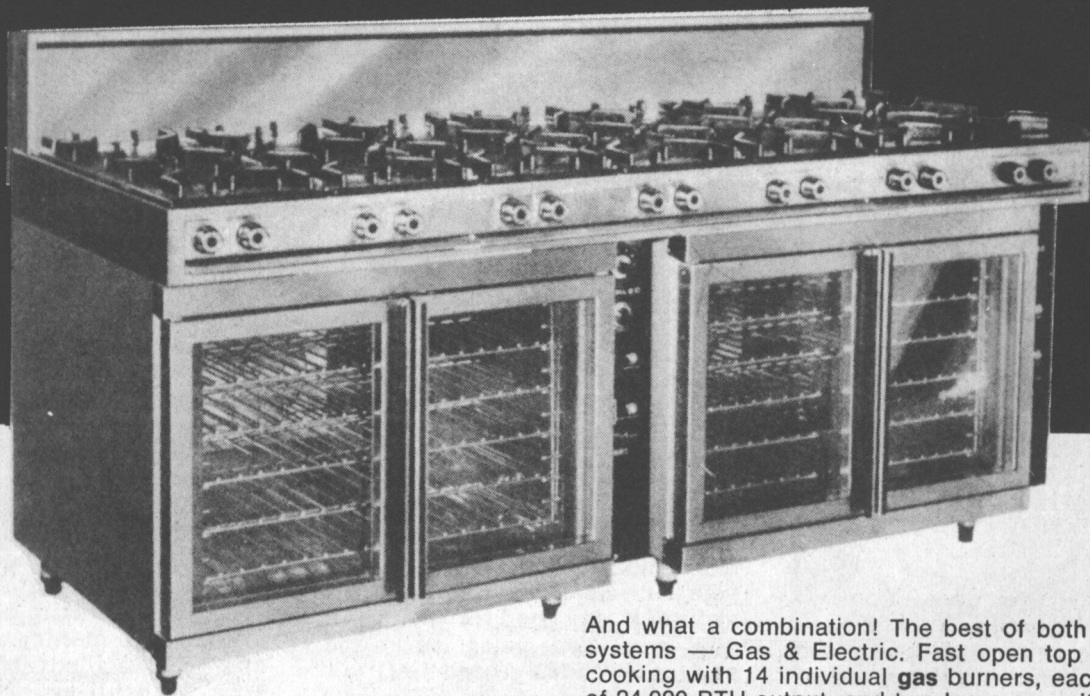
Max: So that in essence you run an emergency service. You also obviously try to befriend child abusers who've got problems, and you run group meetings for them as well?

Gail: That's right, yes.

Max: Tell me about the group meetings. What are they like and how do they operate.

Gail: Well they are run very similar to Alcoholics Anonymous. We don't ask people to come until they can at least admit they have abused their child. Some people won't admit abusing their child, they'll ring you time and time again and just say

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“Look, I’ve done something terrible” but they never actually say what they’ve done. Until they can actually say that it’s no good them coming to group meetings. They come to a group meeting at which there’s a sponsor and a group leader. They talk about their problems, there’s other parents there who also talk about their problems. They can help one another by hearing about what

to us, and until they admit they are child abusers they won’t seek help.

Max: You mentioned sponsors and group leaders, who are they and what do they do in the group?

Gail: Well a sponsor is the professional person, it doesn’t have to be a social worker, it can be a solicitor, it can be a nurse, it can be a doctor — anybody who is in the professional field of work. They

basically sit in on meetings and see groups meet?

Gail: Well they vary from different areas. The Brunswick group meet every fortnight, they meet on the second and fourth Tuesday of the month. The Oakleigh group meet every Thursday night. The central group, they meet when the need be, and we’re forming groups in other areas at the time. They usually meet about once a month.

“bones can be repaired . . .”



“emotional abuse can never never be repaired . . .”

other people have done. They go away with the feeling that “At least I’m not the only person who does this.” It gives them a lift, in other words.

Max: To coin a phrase, groups are for emotional support? Are they intended to advise members on handling their problems? Do they get help on what to do?

Gail: Groups are there for support and also for advice — not rigid advice — we suggest things but we cannot make sure people follow it.

Max: Why aren’t people invited to the meetings if they can’t admit they’ve abused their child?

Gail: Mainly because we don’t go out canvassing, we have them come

that no-one goes away upset, no-one goes away with the feeling that they haven’t gained something. The chairperson at the meeting is just basically there to keep order and to ask people how they’re going from the last meeting, or if it’s a new member who comes in they make them feel they’re part of the group. They introduce them to each other in the group. They basically are just there as the chairperson.

Max: The chairperson is, or has been, a child abuser themselves?

Gail: Yes, this is correct.

Max: But the sponsor doesn’t have to have been a child abuser?

Gail: Oh, no.

Max: And, how often do these

Max: Why are such services necessary?

Gail: Because the committee of Parents Anonymous feel that there isn’t enough done outside the medical fields. You can go to a hospital and you can get medical treatment for a child that’s been physically abused. You can go and see a psychiatrist. But it doesn’t solve the whole problem, you can’t always go to see that psychiatrist when you need help the most, it isn’t convenient, bookings for appointments could be 3 months in advance and you can’t wait 3 months. So Parents Anonymous feel that by having these group meetings we’re not taking away the professional

people's employment, we're trying to help them, that is basically what we're doing. We're giving people group support in between their visits to their specialized fields of psychiatrists or psychoanalysts.

Max: Do most P.A. members receive professional help in addition to help from each other? What can professional help achieve that you can't for yourselves?

Gail: 75% of P.A. members would at some time receive professional help, i.e. before, during or after, and professional help can achieve results in certain circumstances, for example in a case of physical abuse, P.A. can't repair broken bones.

Max: How do you find professional people reacting to your programme?

Gail: Some of them are very good. But basically they feel that we're a lot of do-gooders. As I said before, we're not trying to take their job away we're trying to help them, and if they realized this maybe we could work together in much more close harmony.

Max: Are you saying that you find it difficult to work with professionals?

Gail: Not all professionals, no. I would stress not all professionals, because we've got some very good professionals who do a lot to help us, but there are a lot of professionals, particularly in hospitals, who just don't think we're capable of giving the service that we are giving. I daresay if they came to some of our meetings they'd find that we were getting better results than they are.

Max: What can you do for child abusers that professional services can't do?

Gail: We can give a personal service to them. We also have been there so we know what it's like. A lot of professionals only have it theoretically, they haven't actually had children to abuse themselves. They haven't actually been at the position where they've wanted to abuse their children. Maybe they've got children that are left in the care of a nanny all day, so when they get home at night their child isn't so bad to them. Maybe the nanny feels like abusing the children during the day but she wouldn't say that because she's being paid.

Max: Do you feel that a lot of

professionals really don't understand child abusers?

Gail: A lot of professionals don't understand child abuse in its fullest form. It's the same as the media. They will only publish stories on physical abuse, but there is much more abuse in the verbal abuse and emotional abuse, and it is far more harmful to children to have been emotionally abused than physically abused. I would say that nine times out of ten their bones can be repaired, but emotional abuse can never be repaired.

Max: Do you mean that professionals don't make child abusers feel that they are accepted and understood?

Gail: They make people with child abuse problems feel that they are something out of the ordinary, instead of making them feel that many people have similar problems. Professionals make you feel you are inferior, P.A. makes you feel you are not.

Max: Do you find then that some people would come to you for help in preference to seeking out an agency employing professionals?

Publicity

Gail: I think people would come to us if professionals told them about us. We get a lot from publicity. We get a lot from doctors referring people to us now. But I think if the professionals . . . I'm not saying physically abused children because we can't help them really, we can only help the parents with group discussion . . . we can't help a physically abused child but we can help an emotionally or verbally abused child, because they don't need immediate treatment.

Max: Do people come to P.A. in preference to going to professionals?

Gail: About 50% come to P.A. first, the rest go to a professional but then come to us when they are told about P.A.

Max: In what ways then can you help those children?

Gail: Well we can give them a service from our buddies. They're a group of parent aids, mostly grandmothers, who have got time to

devote going out to these children and their parents, taking the children away for an hour, a day, overnight, or a week. They can also help the mother by going there and helping, talk to her about her problems. Therefore indirectly they're helping the child.

Max: Gail, how did Parents Anonymous originally get started?

Gail: It was originally started by a person called Toni, I won't mention any surnames because this is what we are, we are an anonymous group. She was watching a

"Mod Squad"

programme called "Mod Squad" on the television in June 1973, and she realized that what was happening on this programme was what was happening to her and her child. She was seeing a social worker at the Children's Hospital at the time and she mentioned this to the social worker. The social worker said to her "Well, Toni, if this is what you feel is needed, what about starting a group?". Toni thought it was a good idea but didn't quite know how to go about it. In the meantime, between the visit when she'd spoken to the social worker and her next visit, another mother had rung up and said that she'd seen the same programme and had felt the same way. The social worker found out that they lived near one another and she made contact with both of them and gave each other their phone number and said "If this is what you feel should be done then you should set to and do it." Which of course is what they did. They then advertised, Toni did an article in *The Age*; Maggie — this is the other girl — she did an article on the TV programme "No Man's Land" and from that she appealed for mothers that had child abuse problems, not necessarily physical abuse again, to contact her. I would say within probably 2 hours of her arriving home she had at least 7 or 8 mothers ring her, I was one, Dale was another, Diana was another, Ro was another, and there were several others who have since dropped out of the group. We then decided that we should have a meeting together, which we had in July 1973, and we decided that there was definitely need for a group of this sort in Vic-



Man, woman and child

Robert Ashton/Scoopix Photo Courtesy

toria, as well as other parts of Australia. So we decided we'd do a bit more advertising and we'd get a few more mothers that perhaps hadn't seen "No Man's Land" interested to come along, which we did. We then had our next meeting in Cheltenham, we had about 30 mothers turn up to that. It was pretty hectic because we had as many children, little babies as well. But from there on we've gone forward, we haven't gone back once.

Max: You mentioned a lot of advertising being done, has this been one of the functions of Parents Anonymous — to talk about the point of view of the parent who abuses their child?

Gail: Yes, and it is our hope to do a lot more in this field, so we want to get out to schools and health centres, to groups dealing with children, even to mothers' clubs and perhaps elderly citizens groups, because we can use elderly citizens quite a lot because they can take a child out for a mother. So even, it goes right across from almost a teenager right through to a grandparent age. They can all be of help to people who abuse their children.

Max: And when you look for publicity about child abuse, how do you find the community generally reacts to people who have abused their children?

Gail: Generally, I think this is probably the media's fault, the only publicity that gets through is about physically abused children, they never seem to want to take any other form of abuse for publicity. Maybe because they have to sell their papers, they have to sell their programmes, and if they've got just a meek and mild verbal abuse it doesn't cause nearly as much sensation as what an article on physical abuse will. So therefore people are pretty startled when they read these articles because they think "My God, how could she have done it?" It isn't always a mother though, sometimes it's the father. So maybe they should say "My God, how did he do it?" sometimes.

Max: So you feel that child abuse problems get exaggerated in the press.

Gail: I don't think they get exaggerated but I think that perhaps they don't get the right text across to the general public. I know for one thing most people associate child abuse as just physical abuse, and if you talk to them about any other form of abuse they don't want to know.

Max: What sort of people usually get attracted to Parents Anonymous, are they people who physically abuse their children or do people who've emotionally mistreated their children also come to the meetings?

Gail: Mostly the people we've got at the moment are people who have actually emotionally abused their children. It seems rather strange when all the publicity we get is about physical abuse. We've got a few people who have physically abused children in our group. Maybe it's just that if people know they've abused their children they think "Well where can I ring?" They ring Lifeline and Lifeline put them on to us. Maybe it's just fluke that we get them.

Max: Do people who have physically abused their children find it much more difficult to identify themselves than people who've done other things?

Gail: No, I don't think so, but I think what happens is that they tend to go to the hospital and then of course we don't hear about them

“the appointment doesn’t always . . .”

because the hospitals feel they can solve their problems, which isn’t always the case. We’ve got one member now who’s child has been separated from her for a long time due to physical abuse. She found she didn’t get very much help even though she’s been going to a social worker, a psychiatrist and a doctor. But she happened to hear about Parents Anonymous and she thought “Well I’ll try it” because she was willing to try anything, and she admits now she’s got more help from us in just a few months.

Max: What have you been able to do for her?

Gail: Basically we’ve been able to make her feel that she’s not the only person who does this to her child. We’ve also made her feel that she has got friends, and not everybody’s against her, and not everybody thinks she’s such an ogre. Let’s face it, anybody could do it to their child, it doesn’t have to be a particular type of person, there isn’t a particular person you could pick out in the street and say “Yes, they are child abusers” because it could be anybody. It could be the people in Toorak who abuse their children, it could be the people in any of the slummy areas, and there are slummy areas in Victoria. So you can’t say when you’re walking down the street “That child’s abused, or that parent is a child abuser”.

Max: It’s not confined to any walk of life.

Gail: Certainly not.

Max: Do you find that people who have abused their children in some way frequently have those problems you referred to of loneliness and the feeling that they’re terribly different from other people?

Gail: Yes, I would say that this is mainly their problem. They perhaps don’t have a car, and their husband’s out from 7 till 6 at night. They live where there perhaps aren’t many other young families, they don’t like to go and ask the neighbour next door because she’s granny who’s so involved with her bowls or something else, Meals on Wheels or

something, so they live in a little world of their own, and their little world of their own eventually explodes around them.

Max: And it’s those sort of things that P.A. can do more about than the normal professional services that we think of sending people to?

Gail: Well I think so, because as I said before, if you make an appointment, that appointment doesn’t always fit in with the particular time you need help. Whereas P.A. is only a phone call away.

Max: Gail, you’ve mentioned how you became involved in Parents Anonymous yourself. Could you tell us something about the problems that you had that made you feel such a group was important for you?

“Problems”

Gail: Well basically what I have said before is what caused my problems.

I was in a house on my own, I had 3 little children, and they were little, because the eldest was only 3½. I was without a car, we did have a phone admittedly, but I haven’t many relations in Australia. I did have a few friends but they didn’t live really near me, they didn’t have cars either but they had families that they could go to. My parents were here, they lived with us. Naturally enough they expected the house to be very neat and tidy when they came home, and with 3 little children it is rather hard to do this.

So I found that I was getting on at my children because I was forever picking up toys, I was forever clearing up where they’d torn up Kleenex tissues on the floor or they’d split the paint pot, or they’d knocked a glass of milk over. All these things take time on top of housekeeping, and any mother who can’t get out feels that the world is closing in on her and she can’t, when her husband comes home, really turn round and lay into him and bash him up because of the way she feels, because he’d 9 times out

of 10 give her a black eye probably, so therefore she takes it out on the next thing that she can, which is her child who is at home with her all day. She might start by saying “Oh I do wish you’d go away and leave me alone”. Well to a child that’s a terrible thing to say because they think “Well she doesn’t really want me, perhaps I’d better go away”, and they become a little shell, they don’t open up, they can’t talk to anybody. And when Daddy comes home they sit in a corner, they can’t communicate, therefore she’s really depriving her children. By being at home with them doesn’t necessarily mean that she’s giving them the attention that she really should be.

Max: And that’s what happened to you, is it?

Gail: Basically it’s what happened to me, yes.

Max: How did Parents Anonymous help you deal with those problems?

Gail: Because when I originally joined Parents Anonymous there were 7 of us and we were so busy that I was never home anyway, and so therefore I was out meeting people — other people were taking my children into their home while I had to go and talk to groups, or while I had to go in for articles to be published in the paper. So I was away from my children, I was getting the break that every parent needs, even if it’s only for an hour a day. Every parent needs a break from their children. Father gets away, I know he goes to work and he works long hours, and he works hard when he’s at work, but at least he’s away, he’s talking to other people. Mother’s at home, she’s only got one little toddler at home perhaps. What can she talk to that child about? Alright she can pick up the phone, she can talk to her friends. It’s not the same as actually seeing that person and being able to sit down over a cup of tea, or even out shopping, and if you don’t have a car and you live a long way from the shops by the time you get there you’re tired anyway.

“fit with the time you need help”

Max: So that getting involved in P.A. gave you the break that you needed?

Gail: Yes.

Max: And you talk as if you benefited from getting involved in all that activity too.

Gail: Yes, I did, because I found I was wanted. At home I felt that I was just there and I was meant to be at home, I was never meant to go out, I was just meant to stay home, clean the house and look after the children. When I joined P.A. I found that other people wanted my help, other people wanted me to go to their homes and talk to them and I found that I was enjoying — not necessarily being involved in child abuse, but at least meeting people and helping others.

Max: It's a cliché in some ways, but really helping other people helped you?

Gail: That's correct, yes.

Max: Do other members of Parents Anonymous find the same thing?

Gail: I would think that of all the people that are in Parents Anonymous they find this is the important thing. They're wanted and they're needed, not just by their families.

Max: So that when you've got a problem, being on the receiving end of help isn't the only thing that you need.

Gee! I'm glad.

Gail: It's good to be able to give someone else help, it builds you up when they can turn round — if they've phoned you in an emergency and they get help from you they'll phone you later and say “Gee I'm glad I had your number, it was really good to talk to you”, and you feel you've been built up and it's a really good feeling inside.

Max: Did you yourself attempt to get help from any of the usual social agencies?

Gail: Yes, I did, I went to a psychiatric clinic.

Max: And how did that work out for you?

Gail: Well it solved some of my

problems, except that I was told that my child was that way and I'd always have her that way, and there was nothing more they could do for me except give me a sleeping tablet or give my daughter sleeping mixture which for a time solved its problems, but the problem is still there, they didn't really solve the problem they were just covering it over.

Max: When you say the child would always be that way, what way do you mean?

Gail: Well she was hyperactive as a child, she was very spoilt by my father because she was the only grandchild, and she would have been the only grandchild had I not had the other children. And I found that I would say “no” to her and he would say “You're being too hard on her” and he'd give in to her, and she'd play on this she'd say “Can I have it” and I'd say “No”, and she'd say “Well can I have it grand dad?” and he'd say “Yes”. So I really found I didn't have any control over my own child.

Max: Is that still the case?

Gail: It isn't quite so much the case now because my child is at school now and so she has to have discipline at school, which I find is good because I can then say “But the teacher said this is what she has to do” and I have a bit of a recourse on my father then.

Max: And is she as hyperactive as she used to be?

Gail: No, she's not so hyperactive now, occasionally when there's holidays on yes, she is hyperactive because she hasn't got enough to fill her day out. There again, perhaps that's my fault because I've got two others too.

Max: So by the sound of it you don't need those sleeping pills quite so often as you used to.

Gail: No, I don't. Hardly use them at all now.

Max: Gail, as President of Parents Anonymous in Victoria, what sort

of difficulties do you find that your organization has had in developing its services?

Gail: We find we've got a problem in the fact that we obviously don't get across to enough people because they're going obviously to Government Organizations or welfare organizations and the welfare organizations are not passing them on to us, when possibly all they need is group discussion. I'm not saying that every case needs this, but in a lot of cases that the hospitals and welfare organizations get, it must be just group discussion they need, therefore they could be passed on to Parents Anonymous and we could help them. Therefore we'd help the hospitals and welfare organizations with their work load.

Max: Is Parents Anonymous as an organization difficult to run?

Gail: It's not difficult to run because we've run now for 3 years without very much money behind us. We could run a lot better if we had more money, we could run a lot better if we had a general meeting house, we could run a lot more group discussions, we could run a lot more for our members if we had a place that we could meet. We could also run our phone service a lot more efficiently because we'd have someone there all the time, whereas at the moment a mother could ring a number and not get someone home, she could ring 3 or 4 members and not get someone home.

Max: And members are bearing the costs of all those things themselves?

Gail: Well we do have fund raising which does help us a bit. We're not a small organization in our phone service, but we are in the numbers of people actually coming to group meetings or in fund raising activities. We therefore don't make a lot of money at the fund raising, but we do have membership fees for associate organizations, we do have a small membership fee for our members. This covers them getting

newsletters and getting literature about forthcoming events. But it isn't really enough.

Max: So that getting financial support from interested people and organizations is one of your biggest needs?

Gail: Is one of our biggest needs to spread the word, yes.

Max: Are there other self-help groups for child abusers in other States?

Gail: There is a group in Sydney, it's run by professionals. It was run along our lines because a social worker who was helping us went to Sydney, told them about our group and they started this group, it's called Prevention. But as regards to any other Parents Anonymous groups, no there are not any other Parents Anonymous groups, and if there were they would come under us because we have permission from America to start the groups in Australia.

Max: And there's a very active Parents Anonymous group operating in America?

Gail: A very active group, yes.

Max: What is your relationship with the American P.A.?

Gail: They have given permission for groups to be started in Australia along the same lines. They give us supportive information. They send regular leaflets and newsletters re what they do and what they are striving for, and we try to adapt them to the Australian way of life.

Max: What about other States of Australia, have you heard about other States having similar organizations?

Gail: No, only the Prevention in Sydney.

Max: So that then there's a very big need for more self-help activity in this area?

Gail: Yes, oh yes.

Max: If people in other States were

interested in starting up branches of P.A. could you help them?

Gail: Yes, we are available for consultation. The way we would start would be for a social worker in a children's hospital or welfare organization to contact us. We would send literature about how we operate. If finances permitted, we would like to have training courses.

Gail can be contacted for further information as follows:

The President,
Parents Anonymous,
P.O. Box 12, Chelsea,
Victoria. 3196.

The following Victorian members are also readily available by telephone:

Betty: (03) 544 6950
Diane: (03) 56 7704
Ro: (03) 232 9953

A Success Story — Carla

The story

Carla has not had an easy life. One of seven children, her main memories of her early years were of her parents fighting — about literally everything. Her father worked hard and her mother drank what he earned as soon as he earned it. He couldn't put up with things so he drank too! Carla's mother used to rip the clothes off her sons' backs and thrash them. When the situation got really bad, Carla would lock her sister and brothers in a bedroom, slip out a window and ring the police. At 13, Carla made the first of seven suicide attempts.

The psychiatrist she saw told her parents not to fight in front of her, but they took no notice.

At 17, Carla began going with an older man, was engaged, and became pregnant. Her fiance then revealed that he was married and returned to his wife. The child, a boy, was born with a deformity of both arms and required special

medical attention. In spite of a Court order, the father paid no maintenance. Upset and feeling the stigma of unmarried motherhood, Carla went to work to try to support herself while her mother looked after the baby. Her mother, who had attempted suicide shortly before the child's birth, suddenly decided she could cope no longer and called the police. The child, who is now 11, was taken into care and made a Ward of State. He was subsequently returned to Carla when she married three years later.

Carla felt little communication in her marriage, and with fear, pregnancy after pregnancy, and sick children, her tension and frustration mounted. Three years ago, pregnant again, she began to physically maltreat her second youngest son (then aged three). Chronically ill, he added to her irritation with his constant crying and the constant complaints this brought from the Housing Commission management and other tenants in the high rise

where she lived. Psychiatric treatment did not help — she was told that there was no serious problem, since her son hadn't been killed, and to take a pill when things got too bad.

Things came to a head in the latter part of last year when Carla met another man, and although knowing him only three weeks, contemplated leaving her husband. The latter, desperate, made her leave the house then shot himself.

Carla describes this as a turning point. She and her husband suddenly realized how much they meant to each other. Although trust is slow in developing, they are beginning to talk out their problems. Carla has joined a group which has helped her with her weight problem. She has joined Parents Anonymous and gained help and confidence from that organization.

She has recently been appointed as an Honorary Probation Officer, and is thinking about a career in welfare work.