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In the eyes of a child

By [SHULA KOPE](#)

Yitzhak Kadman is struggling to save the country's future

Two girls molested a 15-year-old girl this month in Bat Yam. After beating her with a stick, they kicked her, and tried to set her hair on fire. They singed her hands with cigarettes, stripped her, and forced her to drink urine. A group of eight children watched.

A young boy in a boarding school writes that he is afraid he will be raped. His fears are not unfounded. His friend has been stabbed and raped. "I'm scared to go to sleep at night. Maybe you can help me."

Dr. Yitzhak Kadman, head of the National Council for the Child (NCC), receives a daily barrage of phone calls and letters. Some are almost more than he can bear.

"I haven't learned yet not to take things to heart," he says. "After all the years that I have been doing this, I'm still capable of bursting at the seams. I haven't learned to close myself off, to be cynical, to say, 'well, that's the way things are.'"

Kadman carries in his briefcase the 500-page "Children in Israel" report for 2002. The contents are grim. "What worries me is that things are falling apart all across the board," he says with his slow cadenced speech. "Every year we publish a report on the status of children. This year we looked for some bright spots, but could hardly find any."

The number of minors involved in felony cases rose by 6.6 percent.

Three out of 10 high school students report that they are sexually harassed in school.

The number of children suffering from physical and mental abuse has catapulted in the past 10 years by 800%, to about 35,000. There are not enough social workers to meet the growing needs. "The consequence of neglecting children is not immediate," says Kadman. "These processes take time, but they are irreversible."

Kadman, the father of two girls, is worried about the future. "It scares me that if we don't radically change our approach, we will have a social explosion more frightening than an Iraqi missile," he warns. "We will see much greater violence among youths. People will be afraid to walk at night in some places. There will be a far greater consumption of drugs and alcohol. The army will have a shortage of skilled manpower to operate the hi-tech weapons. All this will happen unless you believe in miracles."

Kadman, who wears a kippa, is not one to count on miracles. With a staff of 25 that includes lawyers, social workers, and educational advisers, he has painstakingly built the NCC to be a vigilant watchdog for Israel's children.

The NCC has played a pivotal role in putting children's rights on the map and on the Knesset's agenda. An independent non-government organization, it publishes a report every two years that ranks Knesset members according to their contribution to children's legislation.

"We don't ask favors from the government, and we're not afraid to voice our opinions," says Kadman.

The council monitors the quality of services for children, and serves as the address for anyone wishing to report violations of children's rights.

"Why is it that children are the only members of society whom it is considered legitimate to hit?" asks Kadman. "Thank God nowadays nobody will justify a man who gives his wife a slap because she didn't prepare his dinner the way he likes it. Nobody will say it's okay for an officer to hit a soldier, or for a boss to slap a worker. But to hit children is considered okay. They are still not considered persons."

The organization handles issues ranging from a girl whose father raped her to a child who complains that the local kiosk owner cheats children.

At the heart of the organization is the ombudsman program, which fields approximately 9,000 calls annually in languages including Arabic, Russian, and Amharic. Each call is then directed to the proper authorities and followed up.

"Here's an example," says Kadman and points to a story in that day's paper. Kadman is the one who leaked it to the press. The story began with a recent call to the NCC from a Bnei Brak resident who complained that a local kindergarten was operating in an unsafe building. A call to the Bnei Brak engineering department confirmed that the building has no foundations, could collapse at any time, and has been slated for demolition since 1997.

"Every department in the city explained what it couldn't do," says Kadman. "We went to the media to publicize the case in the hope that this would help. Those children must be taken out of there immediately. It's a miracle the building hasn't yet collapsed. Why must we wait for the disaster to happen and then for the official inquiry commission?"

"We got a response from the mayor's office. They sent us a letter which, if it weren't so sad, would be funny. They didn't close the kindergarten. They didn't take the children out. Instead, they wrote a letter to the owner of the building telling him that if anything happens, it will be on his head."

A spokesman for the Bnei Brak municipality said an engineer with the education department inspected the building recently and decided it was safe.

The incident reminds Kadman of a story, which he says is an apt metaphor for the way things are done in Israel.

Near the town of Chelm there was a large cliff where children liked to play. Since it was steep they sometimes slipped and hurt themselves. The wise men of Chelm convened and found a solution - to move the local hospital to the bottom of the hill, so that the injured could get prompt treatment.

"They didn't think of building a fence that would keep people from falling in the first place," he says.

On the day of the interview in his office in Jerusalem's Talpiot neighborhood, Kadman has several items on his "to do" list. The first is to write an "annoying, provocative" letter to

Education Minister Limor Livnat urging that state-sponsored youth trips to Poland be stopped if funding is not available for all students.

"It's not educational to send only the children of the rich," he explains.

He has a two o'clock appointment at the Ministry of Industry and Trade to discuss the violence in children's computer games.

At five he will attend a hearing in front of 13 judges of the Supreme Court. At issue is the legality of granting army veterans higher allowances for their children. The NCC, a signatory to the petition before the Supreme Court, claims that such a law would discriminate against children born to Arab, haredi, and handicapped parents who don't traditionally serve in the army. Also, today Kadman is awaiting news on the outcome of a hearing about a boy named Nadav. Nadav's case arrived at the NCC like most - through a telephone call. The call was made from a psychiatric hospital, home to the 11-year-old, who has no mental illness and doesn't belong there. "Nadav suffered sexual abuse when he was nine and became very violent," says Kadman. "He was sent to the hospital for observation and diagnosis and ended up staying two years in a psychiatric institute because there was no place else for him."

The hospital asked the NCC's help in finding Nadav a more appropriate placement. Kadman says none of the government agencies the NCC contacted were willing to take responsibility for Nadav. Recently, exasperated hospital officials sent Nadav home with a letter saying he couldn't come back.

"He cannot stay with his family," says Kadman. "There is danger that he will hurt himself or others. It's only a matter of time until something disastrous happens."

Today an intra-agency committee that deals with unusual cases like Nadav's is due to meet to decide which agency will take responsibility for him.

Kadman began the NCC in 1986 with a budget of NIS 500 while he continued his regular job as a lecturer at The Hebrew University and Ben-Gurion University. Today's operating budget has grown to NIS 3 million, all from grants and contributions.

His office walls are covered with posters with messages like "Children should be seen, heard, and believed," and "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." His door remains open at all times as a matter of policy.

"Our first office was in an attic with pigeons in the rafters," he says. "In my wildest dreams I never imagined the NCC would grow to what it is today, all without any government funding." Born in Jerusalem to German immigrant parents, Kadman says that even as a child he tried to fight injustice.

"I remember one day we found that a fence had been built around our neighborhood soccer field with a sign saying a new building was going to go up there. Thinking I could stop the building, I naively organized a demonstration with the other children in the neighborhood." Kadman was almost expelled from his first year of a social work program at Hebrew University. Every student needed to visit a poor family and write a report on the steps needed to help the family adjust to its situation.

"I said that instead of getting them to adjust to a terrible situation, we must take steps to change the situation," he says.

After getting his BA Kadman worked as a social worker and accompanied prime minister Golda Meir on a tour of several impoverished homes.

"Golda, who didn't have any sensitivity to social issues, was shown one family where the children slept on mattresses on the floor," says Kadman. "She said, 'I don't see the problem. I just visited university dormitories and noticed the students take their mattresses off their beds and put them on the floor.' I had the nerve to tell Golda that there is a difference when you have a bed and can choose to sleep on the floor."

Kadman completed his doctorate at Brandeis University in Massachusetts.

The letter to Limor Livnat has been written and signed ("They're not going to like me,") and now it's off to the meeting about violence in computer games at the Ministry of Industry and Trade. "Children are bombarded today with violence in computer games, television programs, and the Internet. I think, with all due respect for freedom of expression, that we have gone too far," Kadman tells Yitzhak Kimchi, commissioner of consumer protection.

"A generation is growing up that is experiencing an unprecedented level of violence. In these games they get points for every person they shoot and every old lady they run over. Children can't distinguish between fantasy and reality. What will give them satisfaction when they get older? This virtual violence gets into the soul. It has an accumulative effect."

"Children today are exposed to an adult world which they cannot digest. Parents purchase their parenthood with money, or they use electronic babysitters which they think can replace them - computers and television. Parenthood today is complicated and difficult. In the past there was the extended family. In today's western, industrialized society children are growing up as psychological orphans. A child cannot grow up like a wildflower. In the end you will get thorns." The meeting adjourns with plans to study US and European models for grading violent video games.

Back in the office Kadman is greeted at the door with bad news. Nadav's case did not even come up during the intra-agency meeting. It will be a month before they meet again. Kadman, who has never met Nadav, leans over the reception counter absorbing the news, his head bowed. It takes him a few minutes to recover. He pounds his hand on the counter in mute frustration.

"It will end badly," Kadman says, shaking his head. "He'll run away, or he'll hurt himself or his mother. I don't know what." Kadman is silent for a moment and then sighs.

There is time before the hearing at the Supreme Court to go over today's mail, which includes the following:

Litigation against a Jerusalem school principal who forced boys to strip, and then fondled one of the students.

A letter from a grandmother in Netivot, who complains that the local kindergarten teacher does not take her granddaughter's asthma seriously. "An asthma attack could cause my granddaughter's death," she writes.

A letter from the Al-Twana Village Council complains that 20 children, ages six to 12, must walk six kilometers out of their way to get to school because of army roadblocks.

"It's a mission," says Kadman. "It's my life's work. It never ends."

What about the 15-year-old girl in Bat Yam who was molested, kicked, stripped, and forced to drink urine? Kadman says a specially trained NCC volunteer will accompany the girl throughout the judicial process, during which she will testify against her assailants. This is part of the NCC's Child Victim Assistance Project. (See Box)

And what about the boy who wrote a letter saying he is afraid of getting raped at his boarding school? After the NCC's intervention, a government investigation showed the boarding school had been the scene of multiple incidents of violence and sexual molestation. The facility has been temporarily closed for reorganization, the boys dispersed among other institutions.

"That story had a happy end," says Kadman. "It doesn't always happen that way."

The NCC phone number is (02) 678-0606.

The child's friend

"You're a liar," the defense attorney bellowed at the nine-year-old boy sitting on the witness stand for cross-examination. "You're inventing the whole thing," the attorney continued. "Your father will forgive you if you say that you made up the whole thing."

"I'm telling the truth," the boy insisted, bursting into tears under the barrage. He looked for the only familiar face in the courtroom, Kobi Hamo, a 28-year-old law student, and ran to him for comfort.

Hamo, a volunteer in the Child Victim Assistance Project, gave him a hug and took him to the bathroom where he could wash his face and calm down.

"Do you want to continue?" Hamo asked.

"Yes, I want to get it over with," the boy replied. During several hours of cross-examination he stuck to his earlier testimony about his father's violence against him.

Hamo is one of about 60 specially trained volunteers of the National Council for the Child who accompany child victims through the labyrinth of a legal system geared toward adults.

"We want to make the whole procedure more child friendly and prevent the secondary victimization of children," says Vered Windman, a lawyer in charge of the Child Victim Assistance Project. Last year, the project - the only one of its kind in the country - provided support and assistance to more than 200 young victims.

This is how it works.

Hamo, who had already helped four other children, first met the boy eight months earlier. He visited him at home.

"In the beginning it's important to build up trust and prepare him for the trial," says Hamo, who gave the boy his home phone number and told him he could call at any time.

Next, Hamo took the boy for a tour of the local courthouse, including the very room where he would testify. He explained the legal jargon and the role of the various officials involved. "I tried to explain to him that he is not the one on trial, that he should only tell the truth, and if he doesn't remember something, to admit that he doesn't remember," says Hamo. Afterward they talked over ice cream.

"My father needs to pay for what he did," the boy told Hamo.

Over the months Hamo kept in touch with the boy and his mother by phone, informing them of changes in the court calendar.

"The hearing was delayed four times during an eight-month period, and each time it brought back the trauma," says Hamo.

"For children the wait seems even longer because of their different perception of time," says Windman.

When the day of the hearing finally arrived, the young witness was emotionally well prepared. He and Hamo had just ordered felafel at the courthouse food stand when they were called to the hearing. His mother could not be present in the room because she was scheduled to testify after him.

"The only person in his corner, that he could trust, was me," says Hamo. "Until he was called to testify I sat next to him with my arm on his shoulder to reassure him. His father was sitting a few meters away."

After two and a half hours of cross-examination, Hamo approached a court official and mentioned that the young witness hadn't even eaten lunch. The hearing was postponed until a later date. They went to eat felafel.

"I felt a tremendous feeling of satisfaction that I was there for him," says Hamo.

Windman says that since the program began four years ago, one poignant case in particular has stuck in her memory. The case involved a girl named Irit, who was sexually abused by an older cousin for many years, and who, when she finally complained, was ostracized by her family. "Irit was 17 when the trial came, and no one from her family came to be with her to support her. She was accompanied by one of our volunteers," recalls Windman. A few days before the cousin was convicted, Irit was killed in a car accident.

"There was no one who came from her side to hear the verdict, except for the volunteer who arrived in her name," says Windman. "The judge did something unusual. She asked both sides to allow publication of the case and then she chose to ask the volunteer as well. He told the court that Irit would have wanted the publicity to encourage other girls to come forward. The judge wrote in her decision: "The complainant fell victim twice - when she exposed her memory and years of suffering and when she felt the distance of her family. Instead of receiving support, a shoulder, and understanding, she was left alone, and was supported in her difficult hours by the National Council for the Child, which filled the role of mother, father, sister, and friend, until she died and went to a place of eternal good."