



# Far From Child's Play

BY TATIANA PERKIN

**“To abuse a child** is to batter their soul. The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children seeks to heal this soul.”

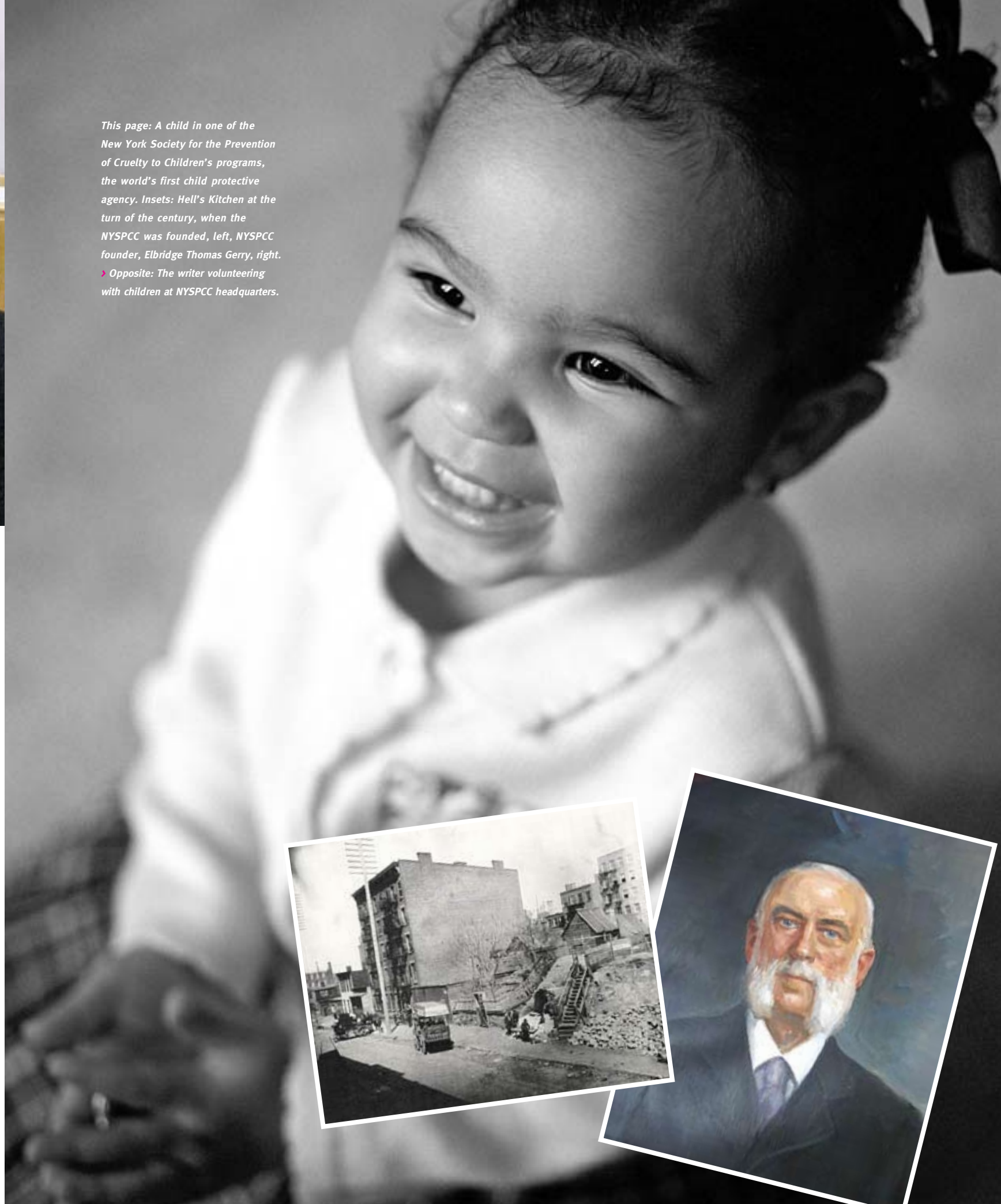
I became involved with the NYSPCC when a friend invited me to join its Junior Committee in 2005. I knew little about child abuse at the time and had pigeonholed it as occurring only in the most troubled households. I quickly learned nothing could be further from the truth. Child abuse happens everywhere—in impoverished families and in affluent families, in Harlem and in Greenwich. But perhaps the most horrifying truth is that it can be perpetrated by those we know and those closest to us. Child abuse encompasses both physical and sexual abuse, and

it happens much too often. Right here in New York City, more than 250 reports are made every day. (Just imagine how many incidents go unreported.)

It's hard to believe that it could happen to someone you know, but that's the reality. You leave your child with a friend who loses his or her temper after a bad day and hits your son, leaving a bruise. Or a trusted teacher crosses the line with an inappropriate touch leaving your little girl feeling anxious and ashamed, and then she's afraid to talk about it. Sexual fondling and abuse, in most instances, is perpetrated by someone the child knows well, not a stranger. That's why parents must constantly be on the alert

*This page: A child in one of the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's programs, the world's first child protective agency. Insets: Hell's Kitchen at the turn of the century, left, NYSPCC founder, Elbridge Thomas Gerry, right.*

▶ *Opposite: The writer volunteering with children at NYSPCC headquarters.*





*This page, clockwise from top: Before-and-after pictures of Mary Ellen McCormack, who was being beaten by her foster mother. A church worker, Etta Wheeler, approached Henry Bergh, founder of the ASPCA for help. He in turn secured the child and won the court case, and helped Wheeler find other philanthropists to found the NYSPCC; one of the early cases of the NYSPCC was identifying two children who had been abducted from their mother on the Titanic. > Opposite: volunteers with "Safe Touch" puppets used for victims of sexual abuse. > Inserts: Members of NYSPCC's Junior Committee, which raised \$136,000 for the trauma program.*

to protect their children and report their suspicions to the proper authorities immediately.

Many abused children enter adulthood with their lives clouded by guilt, suspicion, depression, and a deep-rooted sense of insecurity. Some of these adults suffer in denial, while others are desperate to seek help, but don't know where to turn. As we know, support and mental health services can help one recover from an abusive past—and the earlier the better.



That's where the NYSPCC comes in. As the world's first child protection agency, it responds to the complex needs of abused and neglected children and those involved with their care by providing best practice counseling, legal, and educational services. In its state-of-the-art clinic, expert clinicians provide trauma-focused therapy customized for children who have survived unimaginable abuse. Then, they go a step beyond by teaching their fellow colleagues their treatment techniques so that even more abused children are helped. But the NYSPCC also tries to step in before abuse happens by sharing their prevention resources.

About the time that I became involved with the NYSPCC, I saw an episode of Dateline NBC's "To Catch a Predator" in which the police uncovered a list of men purchasing child pornography online. Guess who was on the list? A pediatrician. You heard me. A pediatrician who took an oath to care for children later used his power to prey on innocent them.



My pessimism was soon replaced with optimism when I learned of the NYSPCC's Safe Touches program, a sexual abuse prevention workshop. Using puppets and interactive play, the NYSPCC teaches children in kindergarten through third grade in elementary schools throughout New York City about body safety and the difference between recognizing safe and unsafe touches. Children learn how to seek help if they feel unsafe or confused and how to use assertive language to protect them. The child is now armed to protect himself or herself with appropriate communication skills. I only wish this was available when I was a child.



Luckily, I was spared from abuse, and I am thankful that I never had to face that pediatrician, but I shiver knowing that many children are not so lucky. Many are hurt and don't tell their parents either out of fear, shame, or because they've been told "it's a secret." The Safe Touches workshop equips children to handle these transgressions and also how to prevent them. With the NYSPCC's help, we have an amazing opportunity to teach children how to protect themselves. In turn, it is our responsibility to teach our own children, and to help the NYSPCC further its mission to protect children.

Although prosecuting those who harm children is best left to the authorities, I am happy to play a role by supporting the NYSPCC. In 2006, I co-chaired the Junior Committee's annual fund-raiser for the first time and have served as its president since then. The Junior Committee has donated its proceeds, amounting to \$136,000 over the past five years, to the NYSPCC's trauma-recovery program. And every year, the board of directors hosts a fall gala, the proceeds of which are donated to the NYSPCC. This year, the gala will be held on November 18, at The Plaza. I can't help but feel elated knowing that we are helping restore tortured souls child by child.



You can, too. But you also have the opportunity to prevent abuse. As parents, you can't be with your child every minute of the day to protect them from predators. But you can educate yourselves and give your children the tools they need to protect themselves when on their own. As the NYSPCC reminds us through its daily work, your child and every child deserves a mind filled with peace, a heart filled with love, and a body filled with strength. ♦

*For more information on the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, visit [nyspcc.org](http://nyspcc.org). For more on NYSPCC's upcoming gala, email [bdarnell@hgnyc.com](mailto:bdarnell@hgnyc.com).*