

"What's Up?"

Working Toward "Families Without Violence"

The Support Center for Child Advocates, Women In Transition (WIT) and the Women Against Abuse Legal Center (WAALC) have come together to serve the special needs of women and children who live with domestic violence. A creative, cutting edge initiative, *Families Without Violence*, will offer direct representation and supportive services to the child and the non-abusive parent. Funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, *Families Without Violence* will improve our system's ability to respond to troubled families.

In today's system of care, collaborative professional intervention for children and mothers who live with domestic violence is inconsistent, at best. This lack of coordinated effort creates a gap in services that results in missed opportunities for families to heal. The traditional separation of child and adult creates issues that also pose serious risks to health and safety, particularly for children who witness parental violence, but are not themselves the targets of abuse. In Philadelphia, as in most parts of the country, when children are involved in a domestic violence case in the courts, they are unable to obtain appropriate protection, unless they are threatened or abused *and* identified as such in the court petition. Child welfare officials are rarely informed of domestic violence in the home if the abuse is not specifically directed at the child. When authorities get involved, the child may be separated from the family, or a determination is made that the perpetrator is out of the home, and the case is closed. In either scenario, the deep seated causes and lasting effects of family violence remain unrecognized and unresolved.

The wounds and scars of the child who witnesses parental violence are harder to detect than those of the abused child, and their problems often last significantly longer. Yet, the behavioral disturbances displayed by both populations are essentially the same. Both maltreated children and those who witness parental violence routinely exhibit withdrawal, low self-esteem, nightmares, bed-wetting, self-blame, post-traumatic stress, and aggression against peers, family members, and property.

The mothers of these children are understandably confused and disorganized. As battered women, they feel terrorized and helpless. They sometimes relinquish many of the duties of parenting to their children, who become "parentified" at a young age and feel responsible for parent and sibling protection. The battered woman often finds herself unable to end the relationship before harm comes to her children, and they are taken from her. She needs help to strengthen and learn new parenting skills.

Families Without Violence will focus on strengthening the bond between the child and the non-abusive parent, and will work to improve her ability to raise and nurture her children. The Project will study the linkage of domestic violence and child abuse from inside the cases to help families rebuild lives filled with safety and stability. WIT social services will include comprehensive needs assessment of child and parent, peer support group counseling, and individual and life management counseling. Volunteer Child Advocate lawyers from the Support Center will represent the children in child welfare dependency proceedings and in criminal prosecution of the perpetrator, while WAALC volunteers and staff will provide legal representation and lay advocacy for the victimized parent.

The Support Center helped start Philadelphia's dialogue on the connection between domestic violence and child abuse in June 1995 at a joint meeting of the *Law Enforcement Child Abuse Project* and the *Domestic Violence Coalition*. Co-sponsored with *Women In Transition*, the meeting was called to help create a child-centered, family-oriented, coordinated, and caring response to victims of domestic violence. *Families Without Violence* is also historic as the Support Center's first grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. Watch for updates on this initiative in upcoming editions of **AdvoKids**.

The Pew Charitable Trusts support nonprofit activities in the areas of culture, education, the environment, health and human services, public policy, and religion. Based in Philadelphia, the Trusts make strategic investments to help organizations and citizens develop practical solutions to difficult problems. In 1998, with approximately \$4,734 billion in assets, the Trusts granted more than \$213 million to 298 nonprofit organizations.