

Frankly Speaking

Prevent Child Abuse

How does one prevent a parent from beating his child? What does a cocaine addict need, to quit the drug that will one day take her child from her? If interventions wait for such crises to happen, children will be harmed and the problems will run too deep to fix. Significant investment must be made before the addiction sets in, before the abuse starts.



Child abuse prevention efforts seek to invest in people and their potential, with the expectation that learning matters. They teach parenting skills: how to discipline a child without striking him, how to guide

behavior without yelling, how to organize a household before the chaos overtakes you. They offer respite care, childcare, and after-school programming. They infuse high school curricula with child development research, teen parenting, and skills-building for conflict resolution. Younger children learn who to trust, and the kinds of abusive behaviors to report. Prevention work takes on the worthy goals of all human development: the creation or reinforcement of self-esteem and respect for others.

Child welfare work has its dark side, and we all know it. Services targeted at abuse prevention must themselves imagine the possibility of depravity, while working presently with the optimistic promise of goodness. For poor and troubled families, too many bad things happen to allow us a cavalier, glossy perspective that all might be better. This tension stretches the mind of prevention workers, who must have the faith of a second-grade teacher hoping her students will succeed as adults, and the persistence of a preacher guiding a sinful people.

In court recently, a judge heard that in-home service visits were happening twice weekly. Most of the talk was about the investigative efforts of the social worker: Was the mother present when she was supposed to be? Who was providing childcare? The judge stopped the proceeding to query: what is the worker doing with this family? She asked the key question about the content of the in-home services, signaling that what the visit offered was as important as what it found.

How will we measure success? Evaluation is important, and difficult. Prevention programs stop bad things from happening, and so the task of evaluating them involves proving the negative. The annual Children's Report Card, produced by Philadelphia Safe & Sound, offers us citywide measures for the

health and well-being of children by looking at their activities, behaviors and experiences. Another measure of success is an increase in demand for the service: as supportive programs become available in the community, consumers are expected to participate, and that increases the demand for the programs.

Abuse prevention requires public investment of resources and private investment of dedication and heart. For the parent who wants to raise a healthy child and who has access to the support and training that might make a difference, the measure of success is the stability of the family and the growth of the child to wholesome independence.

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A Disturbing Picture in Pennsylvania

In 2002 —

- 24,408 reports of child and student abuse were received (a 6% increase from 2001).
- 49 children died as a result of abuse.
- 5,057 reports of suspected child and student abuse were substantiated.
- 8,953 children were removed from the setting where the abuse occurred.
- 17,796 reports of suspected abuse were made by mandated reporters.
- 74% of all the substantiated reports were made by mandated reporters.
- 56% of all substantiated reports involved sexual abuse.
- 74% of perpetrators had a parental relationship to the child.
- 21 reports of suspected student abuse were investigated — 11 reports were substantiated.
- As of December 31, 2002, there were a total of 91,591 substantiated reports in the statewide central register.
- 8 out of every 1,000 children living in Pennsylvania were reported as victims of suspected abuse in 2002. Two out of every 1,000 children were found to be victims of child abuse in 2002.

Information courtesy of
www.parentsanonymousofpa.org