

## **People Have the Power to Prevent.....**

A multiple choice about our chances of preventing child abuse and neglect:

- A. Not much can be done to prevent child abuse and neglect.
- B. The best we can hope for is to keep abuse and neglect from happening again after maltreatment of a child has been identified.
- C. We can literally, prevent abuse and neglect—that is, we can keep it from ever happening in the first place.

Up until the 1960s, most people believed A was the correct answer. At that time, society barely recognized that child abuse and neglect was an important issue, and little was being done to help children in these situations. Few cases were ever reported and, when they were, there were few agencies in place to respond appropriately.

Police often viewed household violence as a matter of private and not public concern. Abuse was ill-defined and in most cases occurred behind closed doors. Children who did disclose were rarely believed. Runaways were looked upon as bad kids and either sent home or to detention centers. No one seemed concerned with what they might be running from.

In 1961, the American Academy of Pediatrics held a conference to discuss, for the first time in this century, the “battered child syndrome.” Presentations at the conference made the connection between abuse and certain types of childhood injuries—such as scars, fractures, burns and bruises—seen by pediatricians.

This conference raised public awareness. People began to understand the insidious problem of severe neglect and its damaging impact on physical and mental development.

Protecting children became a public responsibility. Professionals began to believe that once a child was on the protective services caseload the abuse could be stopped.

Protective services such as Connecticut’s Department of Children and Families became symbols of hope. People began to report suspected abuse to the new agencies as never before. Between 1968 and 1972 reports of abuse in California went from 400 to 4,000.

Yet in time these growing caseloads began to tax resources, and complex issues began to emerge. Child-protective services are working with the most challenging and troubled families and children. Tough decisions are made by workers every day. Keeping children safe 24 hours a day is not a simple task.

Abusive parents are often ordered to undergo treatment in an attempt to prevent the recurrence of maltreatment. Children struggle to cope with the disruption in their lives, and many need ongoing help to overcome physical and social developmental delays.

Protective services can stop the abuse, but the pain these children feel can go on for a life-time. Neglected children are more likely to drop out of school and become involved in crime. These children show up as adults on the caseloads of the departments of mental health or social services, or in our prisons. They are apt to grow up to live in poverty.

So if you selected choice B on the quiz, you would be right — child protective services can keep abuse and neglect from happening again after maltreatment of a child has been identified. But the social and financial cost of waiting until after the fact is extremely high.

The best answer is C. New research shows that we can keep abuse and neglect from happening in the first place.

In Connecticut, we've been testing out this strategy with a number of programs. Chief among them is

Healthy Families (now Nurturing Families), a voluntary prevention program that supports vulnerable parents at critical points in their lives—when their first baby is born.

With Healthy Families, support workers become involved during the mother's pregnancy and continue working with the mother, her baby and her family for at least one year.

They spend time with the new parents and the baby and provide information about child development. They help the family to bond with their new child and take hold of their new responsibility. They help new parents who may be dealing with difficult and potentially overwhelming circumstances, like a difficult birth, a colicky or sick child, lack of support or financial stress.

When appropriate, the program encourages the parents to finish school, to secure jobs and to find and utilize the services of a pediatrician. The results of Healthy Families? Among participants in the program:

- The rate of child abuse and neglect has been significantly reduced while immunizations and the use of pediatric care have become routine.
- Parents are more sensitive to their children's needs and have more realistic attitudes about their responsibilities.
- Parents make significant gains in education, employment and self-sufficiency.

Children who get off to a good start and have positive relationships with their parents and a stable family life are more likely to succeed in school and less inclined to act out in self-destructive ways when they enter adolescence. These kids have a shot at a bright future.

*Article by Karen Foley-Schain, executive director of the Children's Trust Fund, first appeared on the Other Opinion page of the Hartford Courant, May 19, 1999.*

