

We all have a role to play in ending child neglect

Experts lump abuse and neglect together under the umbrella of "child maltreatment." While they often occur together, abuse and neglect are fundamentally different experiences and they produce different consequences. If "child abuse" is the term that describes all the bad attention rained down on some unlucky children, "neglect" is the term for all the love, care, kindness and protection that so many more children never get.

Severe neglect can take many forms: the withholding of things such as physical touch, emotional nurturing, medical care, proper shelter, and educational services. In such cases, a parent is ignoring what the child needs for normal development. Severe neglect is the most common type of child maltreatment by far, accounting for about four of the five calls to Child Protective Services nationally — more than calls about sexual, physical and emotional abuse combined. Because neglect doesn't leave a visible bruise, it can be harder to see, and harder to prove, and so is likely to be underreported compared to abuse.

When an infant's cries for food or attention go unmet, its natural stress response continues to increase until the problem is remedied. When a baby's needs go chronically unmet, the stress overdrive can lead to serious health consequences. A theory of how neglect affects the developing brain is that sensory deprivation accelerates a natural pruning process designed to clear away connections that aren't being used. The result? The brain of a severely neglected child is much smaller and it works differently than one which has been exposed to positive human attention, comfort and support.

Neuroscientists' studies of brain development are beginning to explain why neglected kids and teens often develop mental health problems, struggle in school and are far more likely to become victims of violence and sexual abuse. Children who are severely neglected and do not get the support they need to heal are more likely than other kids to drop out of school, end up homeless, turn to crime, and rely as adults on social welfare programs.

Thankfully, the research also shows that, with the right inputs, dysfunctional brain patterns can be overcome.

When we take stock of these sobering stories during April – *National Child Abuse Prevention Month* – it's easy to be overwhelmed and to ask yourself, "What can I possibly do to make a difference?"

The answer is that you can do a lot. Everyone can play a role in preventing child abuse and neglect by becoming advocates for children.

Here are some steps you can take to make our community safer for our children.

- Be vigilant for signs of abuse and neglect when you are with children. Offer extra time and attention to fragile children.
- Keep the Social Services number, (877) 244-0864, close at hand. If you suspect a child is being abused or neglected, you can report your suspicions confidentially. Reporting can do more than make a difference. It can save lives.
- Become a CASA (Court-Appointed Special Advocate) volunteer to stand up for abused and neglected children, giving them a voice while they are involved with the foster care and family court systems.
- Donate your money or volunteer your time to a social service agency that helps children who have been, or are at risk for being, abused or neglected. Agencies such as the River City Connections Family Visitation Center, the Parents As Teachers Program, Southeast CASA, or the Food for Thought Program are good examples of programs that help at-risk children.

Your advocacy for children will not only help lessen child abuse and severe neglect, it will improve our community for everyone who lives here. When we work together to protect vulnerable children, it saves lives while also breaking the cycle of child maltreatment.

We all have a role to play. What will yours be?