

Effective parenting and nurturing familial relationships lay the foundation for children's healthy development and for a stable and productive society. Families need to be supported by policies and services that ensure children grow up in nurturing and stable environments free from abuse and neglect, thereby enabling children to reach their full potential. Without this support, very young children are especially vulnerable to various issues that impact their development and that may lead to learning difficulties, behavioral problems, and physical and mental health challenges. We must support public policies that promote effective parenting and that reinforce parents' aspirations to raise their children in loving, supportive, and stimulating homes.

Prevent Child Abuse America advocates for:

- **Increasing funding for evidence-based family support services and other necessary resources so that they can be established in all communities and made available to all families. Such services include:**

Evidence-based Family Support Services:

Families are unique. Therefore no one family support program provides families with all the tools they need to foster safe and healthy environments for children. Each community, therefore, must provide an array of evidence-based support services so that every parent and each family has access to the supports they need. Such services must include an appropriate mix of parent education and parent support programs, ensuring that parents receive the information as well as the supportive attention they need. Examples include:

- Home visiting services where trained home visitors work with parents to build on their existing strengths and minimize potentially harmful behavior. Early childhood home visitation provides a voluntary and direct service in which home visitors can help parents understand, recognize, and promote age appropriate developmental activities for children; meet the emotional and practical needs of families; and improve the manner in which parents achieve better outcomes for their children. Research has shown that voluntary home visitation is an effective and cost-efficient strategy for supporting new parents and connecting them to helpful community resources. Quality early childhood home visitation programs lead to proven, positive outcomes for children and families, including improved child health and development,¹ improved parenting practices,² improved school readiness,³ and reductions in child abuse and neglect.⁴
- Mutual self-help parent support groups that offer caregivers the opportunity to share the challenges and successes they have experienced raising children, while helping to reduce isolation and stress, increase self-esteem, and enhance parenting competency.⁵
- Family resource centers within communities that serve as gathering places for families to share the joys and struggles of parenting, help improve service access, and build a sense of community and shared responsibility for the well-being of the community's children.
- Quality early education programs that foster children's cognitive, social, and emotional development.
- Parental education resources and materials that promote and outline reasonable expectations of children's developmental stages; provide strategies for developing a nurturing, secure, and trusting relationship between a parent and young child; provide strategies for dealing with challenging child behavior such as tantrums or the disregard of parents' wishes; provide strategies encouraging positive behaviors in children; and provide information about child health, nutrition, and safety.
- Services that address the special needs of teen parents, such as programs that help teen parents successfully finish school while simultaneously receiving the support and

resources to help them provide a nurturing environment for their children.

Services to Address the Basic Needs of a Developing Child:

All families have basic needs that must be met to create the best possible environment for a developing child. Such basic needs include:

- Affordable and safe housing.
- Affordable, quality health care, including prenatal, dental, and mental health services.
- Affordable, quality child care and respite care.
- Access to workforce development programs and employment.
- Access to quality nutritional programs.

Services to Address Key Risk Factors:

Addressing key risk factors for abuse can place parents in a better position to provide healthy and nurturing environments for their children. Services to address key risk factors include:

- Quality substance abuse treatment services.
 - Quality domestic violence programs.
 - Quality mental health services.
- **Promoting the notion of a shared societal responsibility for investing in the healthy development of children and providing all families with the support and resources they need and deserve.**

The benefits of investing in the well-being of children and families reach far beyond the realm of preventing child abuse and neglect, and reach far beyond the impact on individual families. Confident, knowledgeable, and prepared parents form the foundation for families in which children are more stable, healthier, and better prepared to learn. Child development is the foundation of community development and economic development and this has an impact on society as a whole.
 - **Conducting research to understand the best ways to reach parents and the public with messages underscoring the importance of supporting families effectively.**

Background

We believe that most parents want to provide the best for their children, but often lack the resources and knowledge to easily do so. As a society, we have a responsibility to help parents surmount the challenges that inhibit effective parenting. Effective parenting is essential for stable families, and healthy and stable families help lay the foundation for a healthy society.

Research has demonstrated the profound impact of the interaction of children's genes and early experiences on the developing architecture of the brain. Toxic stress, such as early childhood abusive or neglectful experiences, can be long-lasting and can increase the lifelong probability of poor developmental outcomes, such as learning, behavior, and physical and mental health problems for children. Early intervention and support services for families are vital as families, their communities, and their surrounding environments all play important roles in children's development and the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

An indispensable component of a healthy and stable home is freedom from child abuse and neglect. Child maltreatment rarely stems from unloving or deliberately bad parenting, but rather from a lack of preparation for, or knowledge of, critical challenges surrounding parenting.

Parents face an array of challenges in their efforts to provide the best possible situation for their children. Given the mobility of American society, many parents are apart from the family and friends whom they might otherwise rely on for child-rearing help. In addition, many parents are wary of seeking assistance or advice with regard to their parenting out of fear that their lack of knowledge may reflect badly on them as caregivers.

Moreover, parents may lack an understanding of their children's developmental stages and may hold unreasonable expectations of their abilities. They may also be unaware of alternative means of discipline to corporal punishment, or how to effectively manage their child's behaviors in age-appropriate ways. Parents may also lack knowledge about the health, hygiene, and nutritional needs of their children.

Finally, many communities lack appropriate support services for parents who wish to take steps to improve their parenting. Barriers to support and knowledge, which are reinforced by the inherent challenges of caring for children, can lead to situations in which overwhelmed, upset, or confused parents inflict physical or emotional abuse on their children, or neglect their children's needs.

For more information contact Prevent Child Abuse America at 312-663-3520 or at mailbox@preventchildabuse.org.

Endnotes

¹ Prevent Child Abuse America (2008). *Research Spotlight on Success: Healthy Families America Promotes Child Health and Development*. Available online at:

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³ National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000), *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, J.P. Shonkoff & D.E. Phillips (eds.), Washington D.C.: National Academy Press.

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⁴ Prevent Child Abuse America (2008). *Research Spotlight on Success: Healthy Families America Prevents Child Maltreatment*. Available online at: http://www.healthyfamiliesamerica.org/downloads/HFA_CAN08.pdf.

⁵ FRIENDS National Resource Center for CBCAP (2008). *Fact Sheet #17: The Role of Parent Mutual Support*. Available online at: <http://www.friendsnrc.org/download/parentmutual.pdf>.