To: Jim Humurovich and Ben Tanzer, Prevent Child Abuse America
From: Jeff Linkenbach & Bart Klika
Date: April 30, 2015
Re: Executive Summary of National Child Abuse Opinion Poll 1 (Fall 2014)

Executive Summary
In November, 2014, The Montana Institute conducted a national telephone opinion poll of 1,000 adults to capture how Americans feel about issues surrounding child abuse and neglect. (The margin of error for this study was approximately 3%.) The survey asked respondents about their own behaviors and attitudes and about their perceptions of the behaviors and attitudes of most other adults regarding child abuse and neglect.

Some of the major findings of this survey include:

American adults are very positive about the possibility of prevention: 86.9% of respondents feel that child abuse and neglect is a preventable problem. Americans don’t believe that child abuse is an intractable problem that is too large, difficult, or complicated to overcome. They think that Prevent Child Abuse America can live up to its name.

Despite this hopeful view of what is possible, however, the survey respondents have very negative perceptions about what has actually been happening over the past 20 years. A mere 2.9% think that child abuse and neglect has gone down in the past two decades. Most Americans hold a far more pessimistic view: 67.9% of the survey respondents thought that rates of child abuse have been rising, while 29.2% thought rates have stayed the same.

The survey shows that we live in a culture of caring, in which people are willing to reach out – and to be reached out to – across the family bubble. The vast majority of Americans (97.5) believe that it is their responsibility to take action to protect children from child abuse and neglect, and report that they would and should take action if they suspected a child was being abused or neglected.

Despite their best intentions, however, people are not sure how to intervene safely, and are afraid that doing so might actually make things worse for the child. These barriers to action may contribute to the gap between the overwhelming majority (96.7%) that say they would intervene, and the number that reported actually intervening (74.7%) when they suspected child abuse.
Incongruous Attitudes: Hopefulness and Pessimism about Child Abuse Prevention

The survey results show that American adults have contradictory perceptions about child abuse prevention: while the majority feel that child abuse is a preventable problem, most feel that it is one that has been getting worse over the past two decades.

- American adults are very positive about the possibility of prevention: 86.9% of respondents feel that child abuse and neglect is a preventable problem. They also have very accurate perceptions about how others feel -- 74.4% accurately perceive that most others think it is a preventable problem, too. These findings show a strong attitude of hope.

- Despite this hopeful view of what is possible, the survey respondents have very negative perceptions about what has actually been happening over the past 20 years. A mere 2.9% think that child abuse and neglect has gone down in the past two decades. Most Americans hold a far more pessimistic view: 67.9% of the survey respondents thought that rates of child abuse have been rising, while 29.2% thought rates have stayed the same.

Recommendation: While the majority of Americans believe child abuse and neglect are preventable, the majority also feel that this possibility is not being achieved. This finding suggests actions are needed at the societal & policy levels of the social ecology. For example, it is critical to press for improved metrics and shared data sources in order to monitor our progress. We also need to find ways to harness the hopefulness that so many feel to help prevent child abuse and neglect.

Americans Are Ready to Take Action

Americans think they should and would take action to protect children from child abuse and neglect – and they accurately perceive that others feel the same way. There is strong culture of caring in this country upon which we can build to further reduce child abuse and neglect.

- 90.1% of the respondents view child abuse and neglect as a serious problem; 82.0% of respondents accurately perceive that most other adults feel the same way.

- 86.9% of respondents think child abuse and neglect is preventable; 74.4% accurately predicted that most other adults also perceive it as a preventable problem.

- The vast majority of Americans believe that they would and should take action if they suspected a child was being abused or neglected, and accurately perceive that most others would feel the same. 96.7% said they would take action if they suspected a child was being abused or neglected and 87.2% thought most other adults would take action as well. 97.6% felt they should take action if they suspected a child was being abused or neglected; 91.2% thought most others would feel the same way.

The accuracy of the respondents’ perceptions about how others feel about child abuse and neglect tells an important story about our culture. Congruity between self and perceptions of others shows readiness for action. One reason is that
people perceive support for bystander interventions. When people know that their beliefs and actions are supported by the majority of others they are more likely to speak up and act in pro-social ways.

We Live in a Culture of Caring
The survey results show that we already live in a culture of caring, in which people are willing to reach out – and to be reached out to – across ‘the family bubble’ or other perceived boundaries.

When asked how they would feel if someone offered them services, child care, or other support, 86.4% of respondents said that this would feel helpful and kind – not intrusive, nosy, judgmental, or critical. Only 5.7% reported that they don’t need anybody’s help.

When asked how they have acted when they have seen a parent they don’t know struggling with their children, and a small majority reported responding with compassion and support.

- 60.2% reported that they had offered kind words or encouragement
- 58.2% reported that they offered to help in that moment

Recommendation: Tell people how nice they are! And tell them to notice the norms of civility, concern and generosity around them. While these are not strong norms, they provide a base to build from in helping people move from having supportive attitudes to demonstrating supportive behaviors.

The Gap between Attitude and Action
Nearly twenty-seven percent (26.9%) of survey respondents have been in a situation in which they suspected that a child was being abused or neglected. And while 96.7% of survey respondents said they would take action in such a situation – and 97.6% said they should – only 74.7% of those who had the opportunity to intervene actually did. While this shows an extremely strong attitudinal norm for intervention, it also reveals a significant gap between those who think they would and should take action and those who actually do.

Several factors were identified that may explain this gap between attitude and action.

When we asked respondents what barriers might prevent them from intervening, only 2.5% said that they believed it was not their responsibility to get involved.

Nonetheless, when presented with the idea of actually intervening, respondents cited five barriers to action:

1. 65.1% of the respondents were concerned about making things worse for the child
2. 37.0% were fearful for their personal safety
3. 35.9% of respondents were afraid of retaliation from the victim or perpetrator
4. 32.4% said they didn’t know what to say or do
5. 27.3% cited lack of trust in the child protection system
Recommendation: Fears and lack of clarity about what to do may be keeping those who believe they would and should take action from actually doing so. These barriers can be strategically addressed at the PCAA Chapter level and through messaging to the general public aimed at lowering the perceived barrier posed by each of these factors. Messages can be created that give people and communities tools for taking action and that correct perceptions about the outcomes of interventions.

Action Takers

- The respondents most likely to take action are women, residents of the Midwest, South, and West, married people, and those aware of PCAA. The respondents least likely to take action are older adults and African Americans.

- Respondents who actually took action were most likely to contact Child Protective Services or the police (70.0%) or talk to the victim (62.0%). They were least likely to talk with a community organization (17.0%) or talk with the perpetrator (25.0%).

- Of those who took action, 70% thought their action led to a positive outcome.

- Of those who did not take action when they suspected a child was being abused or neglected, 45.5% wish that they had.

Recommendation: We only hear the horror stories in the media, about both abusive parenting and foster care. What stories are not being told? Do data on outcomes exist? If so, what does it tell us? If there are stories about the positive outcomes of interventions, these need to be captured and shared to reduce people’s fear of intervention. The regrets of those who did not take action also indicate the need for greater tools, resources, and support for intervention. People need to see examples of the emerging reality around them as cues and models for how to engage.

Research recommendation: There is a need to qualify and quantify what we mean by ‘success.’ PCAA can lead the nation through its state chapters in defining what successful outcomes and interventions look like.

PCAA Findings and Messages

- More than a quarter (26.2%) of survey respondents reported having heard of PCAA. This is a very high brand recognition factor. While studies have shown that responses to these kind of awareness questions may be inflated, even a recognition level of half the reported amount would be impressive. This is good news: Americans are hearing about PCAA.

- Awareness of PCAA also proved to be a protective factor: those respondents who reported being familiar with PCAA were significantly more likely to believe that child abuse is a serious problem, that it is preventable, and that they would and should take action to prevent it.
When asked about how they have personally taken action to help children and families, 86.6% of respondents reported having (often or sometimes) given used clothing, furniture or toys to another family directly or by donating them to an organization. 65.3% have (often or sometimes) volunteered for or donated money to a community program that supports children and families. However, only 37.6% have ever advocated for public policies, programs or issues that benefit children and family by writing letters, making calls or voting for particular political candidates.

Recommendation: Given survey respondents' strong feelings of responsibility and their belief that they should take action, there may lots of room to get people more involved in this issue politically. Perhaps this kind of political intervention could be marketed as a “safer” alternative to personal intervention. This is also a way to begin shifting awareness and resources to other levels of the social ecology.

Questions for Further Analysis and Research
Examining the data using bivariate and multivariate analyses (that is, examining the results of more than one variable at a time) revealed intriguing findings and patterns that may warrant further investigation. Interesting examples include the following:

- 17.9% of respondents reported having experienced or witnessed abuse as children. This group was less likely to report that they would take action and to believe that most adults would and should take action if they suspected child abuse and neglect. It seems that one of the many negative outcomes of experiencing or witnessing child abuse or neglect may be a lower likelihood of intervening on behalf of at-risk children. Note that these respondents were more likely not to have completed high school, to be lower income, to be widowed (than single/never married), and to be mandatory reporters of child abuse.

- 9.6% of respondents identified themselves as mandatory reporters of child abuse in their professional careers. The bivariate results suggest that these mandatory reporters were more likely to cite fear of retaliation, fear for personal safety, not knowing what to do, and fear of making it worse as factors preventing them from intervening. Mandatory reporters are also more likely to believe that child abuse and neglect is a serious problem.

- The study showed significant differences in the perceptions and beliefs about child abuse and neglect among different income groups. Respondents who reported an annual income between 30-75K were less likely to think it was a serious problem than those who earned less than 30K and those who earned more than 75K. More work is needed to see if these findings can be connected with studies that correlate income with child maltreatment risk, and to uncover differences in the perceptions and beliefs among different income groups.

- Statistical analysis revealed regional differences in intervention culture. People residing in the Northeast were less likely to take action than those from the South, Midwest, and West. This finding indicates that targeted messaging via PCAA chapters in the Northeast may be a way
to close this regional gap. It also suggests that regional statewide surveys may be a next step to uncover regionally-specific information and trends and develop targeted messaging.

- The multivariate analysis can also be used to direct messages to particular segments of the audience.

Notes for Future Surveys

- This survey did not include questions about respondent’s support for or opinions about policies that impact child abuse and neglect. This line of questioning may be important to include on future surveys in order to assess other factors along the social ecological continuum.

- Future surveys could include questions that get at what situations and scenarios make people more or less likely to intervene.

- Future surveys could include other Science of the Positive constructs such as the emerging HOPE work being done with CSSP, and questions about safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments to coordinate with the CDC.