

Child neglect is the most common form of maltreatment and, although pervasive and sometimes life threatening, is often difficult to identify. As a society, we have a collective responsibility to prevent children from experiencing neglect. To accomplish this, we must initiate and support services and policies that enhance children's development, health and safety and we must advocate for policies and programs to help meet the basic needs of children and families. We must also promote research, training, and public education to strengthen protective factors that buffer the risk factors (eg, depression) for neglect, while also directly addressing those risk factors.

Prevent Child Abuse America advocates for:

- **Increasing services to families such as home visiting, early childhood education, and parent education.**

Child neglect often occurs when parents are overwhelmed with an array of stressors, including the difficulties of coping with poverty and its many associated burdens, single parenthood, limited parenting skills, depression, substance abuse, interpersonal violence, as well as the daily stressors most parents face.¹ Services such as home visiting, early childhood education, and parent education provide emotional support, knowledge, and guidance on how to provide a nurturing environment for children. In addition, ensuring that all children have a quality education will help ensure this important need is met. Other services can assist potential parents in considering their readiness for a family, the number of children they wish to have, and appropriate spacing between births. These services can also help parents effectively care for the children they already have. In sum, services that strengthen families and support parents should in turn enhance children's development, health and safety, and help prevent child neglect.

- **Providing mental health services to parents and neglected children and youth.**

Many neglected children have parents who are emotionally unstable or depressed.² Mental health services can assist such parents to become emotionally healthier and better able to adequately care for their children. In addition, children often face adverse and potentially long-term psychological consequences due to neglect. Mental health services, especially at an early point, can help mitigate these consequences and can help ensure that neglect is not transmitted to the next generation.

- **Ensuring access for all children to affordable, quality health care, including prenatal, dental, and mental health services.**

Access to health care is critical to child and family well-being and helps protect against neglect. Without health insurance, families are less likely to seek timely and preventive health care. When they do, the cost of that care contributes to a family's economic insecurity. Both of these are risk factors for neglect. In addition, children's health care providers are a valuable source of support and advice for parents as they raise their children. They inform parents about community resources such as home visiting programs and parent support groups that can help prevent child abuse before it happens and provide information about child development and strategies for dealing with a variety of parenting challenges.

- **Increasing efforts to address social problems such as poverty, substance abuse, and family violence which contribute to neglect.**

Neglect is often intertwined with social problems, such as poverty, substance abuse, and family violence. It is crucial that greater resources be allocated to reduce these major problems that contribute to neglect. Such efforts must include the prevention of child neglect as an explicit goal.

- **Increasing public awareness efforts to educate the public about child neglect, its**

seriousness, and how they can help prevent it, as well as foster a shared sense of societal responsibility.

Raising public awareness of the serious and pervasive nature of child neglect is essential in order for real change to occur. Children interact with an array of people in their community who play a vital role in their development. We need to recognize this and mobilize significant financial and human resources to address the problem. A public that appreciates the serious and pervasive nature of child neglect should be a crucial ally for necessary changes. They can help advocate for and support the policies and programs needed to enhance children's development, health and safety, and help prevent their neglect.

- **Increasing research efforts to improve our understanding of child neglect abuse—its nature, extent, causes, and consequences, as well as what helps prevent and address it.**

Our current understanding of child neglect is limited. A better understanding is essential to guide policymakers and practitioners to develop policies and programs to tackle neglect. A variety of programs have been developed aiming to optimize children's development, health and safety. Careful evaluation is needed to learn what works, and to replicate effective programs. It is also likely that new policies and programs addressing child neglect need to be developed and evaluated.

Background

Definition of Child Neglect

Child neglect occurs when children's basic needs are not adequately met, resulting in actual or potential harm. Basic needs or rights include adequate food, clothing, education, health care, nurturing and emotional support, and housing. Unlike physical or sexual abuse, that are often identified by specific, discrete acts, neglect is usually an ongoing pattern of a child's needs not been adequately met.^{3,4} There are different types of neglect:

- **Physical neglect:** A child's need for adequate food, clothing, supervision, housing, or protection from the environment is not adequately met.
- **Emotional Neglect:** A child does not receive adequate emotional support, care, or affection.
- **Medical Neglect:** A child does not receive adequate medical, mental or dental health care.
- **Educational neglect:** A school age child does not receive appropriate educational services, including special educational services if needed. Home schooling should not be viewed as educational neglect.

Scope of Child Neglect

Neglect is by far the most common form of child maltreatment, accounting for approximately two-thirds of reports to child protective services. In addition, neglect contributes to about three-quarters of deaths due to child maltreatment. In 2008 approximately 539,322 children (71 percent of all substantiated cases of child maltreatment) were officially counted as victims of child neglect, making it the most prevalent form of child maltreatment.⁵ Moreover, *child neglect is the leading cause of child abuse and neglect (CA/N) fatalities*. In 2008, child neglect alone was responsible for 429 fatalities (31.9 percent of all CA/N fatalities)⁶

Nature of Child Neglect

There is no single cause of neglect. Instead, there are usually multiple and interacting contributors - at the levels of the child, parent, family, community and society. Examples of contributors include a child with a disability, a parent struggling with depression or substance abuse, intimate partner violence, a father who is not involved in their child's life, a lack of community supports (eg, affordable child care), the burdens associated with poverty, and inadequate policies to support families and parents.^{7,8} These characteristics greatly contribute to the intractability of the problem. Combinations of such problems may impair a parent's ability to ensure his or her child's needs are adequately met.

Consequences of Child Neglect

The impact of neglect can be very serious – in both the short- and the long-term, perhaps life long. Neglect can harm children's physical and mental health as well as their social and cognitive development. Physical problems include health complications, injuries and ingestions, and sometimes death.⁹ There are many possible mental health consequences include poor self esteem, depression, and substance abuse.¹⁰ Cognitively, neglected children may have difficulty learning and poor academic achievement.¹¹ The social impact is also clear with neglected children at risk for juvenile delinquency and adult criminal behavior.¹²

It is clear that the consequences of neglect extend far beyond the affected children and families. Enormous societal costs are involved. Prevent Child Abuse America estimated the economic impact of child abuse and neglect at \$104 billion in 2007; and this was likely a conservative estimate. Thus, in addition to the compelling human argument to help optimize children's development, health and safety, there is also a financial impetus to help prevent the neglect of children. The aphorism that "our children are our nation's most valuable resource" should be more than a slogan. Finally, at the heart of child neglect is a concern with their basic rights, their human rights.

The costs associated with the pervasive and long-lasting effects of child abuse and neglect are as undeniable as our obligation to prevent – not just respond to – this problem. In 2007, \$33 billion in direct costs for foster care services, hospitalization, mental health treatment, and law enforcement were supplemented by over \$70 billion in indirect costs like loss of individual productivity, chronic health problems, special education, and delinquent and criminal justice services.¹³

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

Endnotes

¹ DePanfilis, Diane (2006). *Child Neglect: A Guide for Prevention, Assessment and Intervention*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children and Families.

² Ibid.

³ Drotar, D. (1992). "Prevention of neglect and nonorganic failure to thrive". In D. J. Willis, E. W. Holden and M. Rosenberg (Eds), *Prevention of Child Maltreatment: Developmental and Ecological Perspectives*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2010). *Child Maltreatment 2008*. Available from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm08/cm08.pdf>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Goldman, J., Salus, M. K., Wolcott, D., Kennedy, K. Y. (2003). *A Coordinated Response to Child Abuse and Neglect: The Foundation for Practice*. Washington, DC. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Child Abuse and Neglect. Available from <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/foundation/foundation.pdf>.

⁸ DePanfilis, Diane (2006). *Child Neglect: A Guide for Prevention, Assessment and Intervention*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children and Families.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Gaudin, J.M (1993). *Child Neglect: A Guide for Intervention*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children and Families.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Wang, C.T. & Holton, J. (2008). *Total Estimated Cost of Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States*. Available online at http://member.preventchildabuse.org/site/DocServer/cost_analysis.pdf?docID=144.