

To: Ben Tanzer, Prevent Child Abuse America  
From: Jeff Linkenbach  
Date: May 4, 2016  
Re: Executive Summary National Child Abuse Opinion Poll 2 (Fall 2015)

---

### **Overview**

Prevent Child Abuse America hired the Montana Institute (TMI) to conduct a nationwide Positive Community Norms (PCN) telephone poll of 1,000 American Adults in November, 2014. As a follow up to this research, Prevent Child Abuse America asked TMI to conduct a second national telephone survey of 500 American Adults in November and December of 2015. Both surveys were based on the Positive Community Norms approach to prevention, which shows that individual behaviors and attitudes are largely influenced by one's perceptions of the normative (majority) behaviors and attitudes of their peers. The more accurately individual's perceive positive norms, the more likely they are to behave in positive, healthy, and pro-social ways themselves.

This research shows that Americans do not see each other (or themselves) accurately when it comes to issues of child abuse and neglect. Since perceptions of norms have a powerful influence on individual belief and behavior, these misperceptions are critical levers for change. By closing misperception gaps it is possible to change and improve actual behavioral and attitudinal norms.

Because of differences in the questionnaires and the demographics of the respondents, these two studies should be treated as individual "snapshot" surveys, rather than as Time 1 and Time 2 administrations of the same study. Nonetheless, interesting comparisons can be made between the two: the first study showed that Americans feel "stuck" when it comes to intervening in suspicious situations; the second showed that, despite perceived barriers to intervention, Americans are nonetheless doing much more than they realize to prevent child abuse and neglect. Prevent Child Abuse America can build on the positive attitudinal and behavioral norms that already exist among American adults to encourage even more people to take action to support and protect children.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has identified the promotion of Positive Community Norms as a key strategy for promoting Safe, Stable and Nurturing Relationships and Environments, which are central to preventing child abuse and neglect. A crucial component of this strategy is addressing community and societal issues from a positive frame. This shift in focus from reducing risk to increasing protections opens exciting new opportunities for preventing child abuse and neglect. In commissioning this work, Prevent Child Abuse America has become one of the first child welfare advocacy groups in the country to connect perceptions and misperceptions to the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

### Differences between the Two Surveys

The questionnaire and demographics were different for the two surveys. For this reason, they are best treated as individual research studies on the same topic rather than two parts of one continuous study. Nonetheless some interesting comparisons can be made between them. (Note that the margin of error for the 2014 study was approximately 3%; for 2015 it was approximately 5%.)

### Exposure to Child Abuse and Neglect

The two groups of respondents reported very different levels of exposure to the issue of child abuse and neglect. In 2014, 17.9% of respondents reported personally experiencing or witnessing abuse and neglect when they were under 18. In 2015, 30.6% reported childhood exposure.

D5. Did you personally experience or witness abuse or neglect when you were younger than 18?

	Count (2014)	Percent (2014)	Count (2015)	Percent (2015)
Yes	179	17.9 %	153	30.6 %
No	811	81.1 %	343	68.6 %
Don't Know/Refused	10	1.0%	4	.8%

In addition, a much greater percentage of the 2015 respondents reporting ever having suspected that a child was being abused or neglected. Nearly 50% of the 2015 respondents (48.8%) had suspected a child was being abused, compared with only 26.9% in 2014.

But while a larger percentage of the 2015 respondents suspected incidents of child abuse and neglect, they took action much less frequently. In the 2014 group, which surveyed a larger sample and had different demographic characteristics, 74.7% of respondents who suspected abuse said they took action. Only 56.6% of the 2015 respondents who suspected abuse said the same.

	Suspected	Acted
2014	26.9 %	74.7 %
2015	48.8 %	56.6 %

There is nothing in the data itself to explain these differences, though research has shown that many factors influence how people respond to survey questions, including the length of the survey, the order and wording of the questions, as well as differences in administration, such as the time of day in which respondents are reached. More research is needed to establish reliable baseline measures for these key constructs related to child abuse and neglect.

### Perceptions of the Severity of the Problem

In the 2014 survey, respondents were asked if they think that child abuse and neglect is a serious problem in this country. 87.1% of the respondents agreed that this is the case. In the 2015 survey, the frame of reference was changed from “country” to “community.” People often think that problems like child abuse and neglect happen to other people, in other places, and less so in their

own backyard. It is not surprising then that only 63.2% of respondents in the second survey believe that child abuse and neglect is a serious problem in their own communities. In both surveys, respondents’ perceptions of how serious most adults thought the problem in this country or their community were very accurate.

	Actual	Perceived
2014: Do you think child abuse and neglect is a serious problem in this country?	87.1 %	74.5%
2015: Do you think child abuse and neglect is a serious problem in your community?	63.2%	60.8%

*Recommendation: Remind people that child abuse is not something that happens in other, unknown places, but right in their own communities and neighborhoods, and that there are actions they can take to prevent it.*

### The Predictive Power of Perceptions

As mentioned above, the percentage of American adults in the 2015 sample who reported taking action when they suspect that a child is being abused or neglected is 56.6%. This is a small, positive norm for intervention. Yet only 2.8% of respondents accurately perceived that most of their peers would take action. In fact, 79.2% of respondents underestimated how many adults who would take action when they suspect abuse. Another 14.8% overestimate the number of action takers.

Percentage of American adults you believe have taken action	N	Percentage
0 – 50 % (Under)	396	79.2 %
51- 60 % (Accurate)	14	2.8 %
61-100 % (Over)	74	14.8 %
Don't Know/refused	16	3.2 %

*Recommendation: Significant misperceptions exist about the frequency with which people intervene when they suspect child abuse or neglect. Correcting this misperception will give Americans a more accurate – and positive – understanding of who they are, which can change the public conversation and individual behavior around child abuse and neglect.*

Advanced statistical analysis was used to look at the group of respondents who reported that they had ever suspected a child was being abused or neglected. (Note: because of the way the data was collected, this analysis had to be done looking at only this subset of the respondents.) When the responses of this group was examined using odds ratios, a powerful relationship was revealed.

Perception	Odds Ratio to Under perceive
Correctly/Over	2.03

This shows that those who accurately perceive or overestimate the percentage of Americans who take action when they suspect a child is being abused or neglected are two times more likely to take action themselves than those who underestimate the percentage of action-takers. In other words, those who accurately perceive or overestimate how often American adults act to protect kids are two times more likely to act to protect kids themselves.

*Recommendation: There is a correlation between people's perceptions about the actions of others and their own actions. Change perceptions about child abuse and neglect, and actions will change as well.*

### The Characteristics of Those Who Suspect Abuse

The characteristics of those who reported ever suspecting a child was being abused or neglected were examined using logistic regression. This type of analysis moves beyond calculating statistical significance to identifying relationships of statistical importance. It helps to identify predictive factors and what factors most heavily influence others. The relevant factors appear below in descending order of influence.

*Those who suspected that a child was being abused or neglected were most likely to:*

1. Have personally experienced or witness child abuse or neglect under the age of 18 (D5)
2. Perception of the social norm about the frequency with which most Americans suspect abuse or neglect. (Q6)
3. Be a mandatory reporter of child abuse and neglect in their professional career (D8)
4. Be a parent (D7)
5. Have been a mentor to children in your family, neighborhood, or community (q10d)
6. Have heard of Prevent Child Abuse America (D9)

*Recommendation: The number two predictor of whether individuals had ever suspected child abuse is their perception of how often most others have done so. This powerful correlation demonstrates that perceptions of social norms matter. Perceptions of social norms are a powerful avenue for changing the national attitudes and behaviors regarding child abuse and neglect.*

### The Characteristics of Those Who Take Action When They Suspect Abuse

*Of those who suspected child abuse or neglect, the individuals who were most likely to take action (holding all else constant) were:*

1. Those who have been mentors to children in their family, neighborhood, or community
2. Those who have taken a stand for programs and policies that support children and families through voting, letter-writing, meeting attendance or other
3. Donated goods, money, or time to organizations that support children and families

When looking at related factors like the ones above, a key question is: are they modifiable? In this case, all three are potentially modifiable factors. Increasing people's participation in these activities may in turn result in an increase in the percentage of Americans who take action when they suspect child abuse or neglect. These factors also provide information on where Prevent Child Abuse

America might reach people who are likely to act with key strategies and information regarding intervention.

*Recommendation: Promote participation in mentorship programs, involvement in political action campaigns, and support of organizations that support children and families to increase the percentage of Americans who take action when they suspect child abuse or neglect.*

### **Environmental Strategies: Prevention through Political Action and Community Involvement**

The 2015 survey included questions about ways American adults can be active in the prevention of child abuse and neglect through political and community involvement.

#### Community Involvement

When asked directly if they have been active in the prevention of child abuse and neglect, only 27% of respondents reported that they had. It is clear, however, that the survey respondents are not giving themselves credit for the ways in which they work to create positive environments for children. In fact, their responses show that they have been involved in their communities in ways that support and protect children.

- 80% have donated goods, money or time or organizations that support children and families.
- 70.4% have volunteered with kids through places of worship, schools, sports, or clubs.
- 56.2% have been a mentor to children in their family, neighborhood or community.

*Recommendation: An important gap is identified here that can be closed by educating the public about what it means to be active in the prevention of child abuse and neglect -- that providing role models, recreation, volunteer and other support is in fact a means of prevention. Help people realize the role they may already play in keeping kids safe – and encourage them to do more.*

There was one method of involvement that only a minority of respondents reported engaging in: only 38.6% of respondents reported having “taken a stand for programs and policies that support children and families through voting, letter-writing, meeting attendance or other.”

*Recommendation: Find ways to facilitate this type of political involvement among American adults, perhaps through online petitions, simple phone and text action alerts, and other simplified means for getting people engaged around programs and policies that support children and families.*

#### Voting Priorities

When asked, “How important is it to you to vote for political candidates who make children and families a priority?” 65.4% of respondents reported that it was “very important.”

q8.r	Frequency	% of Total
Very Important	327	65.4 %
Important	117	23.4 %
Moderately Important	37	7.4 %
Slightly Important	8	1.6 %
Not Important	5	1.0 %
Don't Know/Refused	6	1.2 %

However, only 48% of respondents accurately perceived that voting in such a manner is very important to most Americans.

Q9. How important do you think it is for most Americans to vote for political candidates who make children and families a priority?

q9.r	Frequency	% of Total
Very Important	240	48.0 %
Important	135	27.0 %
Moderately Important	75	15.0 %
Slightly Important	22	4.4 %
Not Important	7	1.4 %
Don't Know/Refused	21	4.2 %

*Recommendation: The majority of Americans feel that voting for candidates who prioritize children and families is very important, and yet they misperceive that this belief is the norm. By correcting this misperception, Prevent Child Abuse America could turn up the volume on the importance of children and families in the nationwide political conversation and help increase the strength of this positive attitudinal norm.*

### **Adults' Impact on At-Risk Children – And Children's Impact on Adults**

The 2015 survey asked respondents if the presence of one concerned adult who is willing to help can protect a child from abuse and neglect. 76.2% of respondents agreed with this statement, but only 54% accurately perceived that this belief is the norm.

*Recommendation: Encourage people to “be the one” that makes a difference. Remind them that their actions can change children’s lives.*



When asked about the ramifications of child abuse, 93.2% of respondents accurately perceived that the abuse and neglect of children they don't know has an impact on our society and economy – a fact that has been documented in many studies – and 83% recognize that most other American adults feel the same.

In contrast to this strong norm (and strong perceptual congruence) related to the societal impacts of child abuse and neglect, only 58.6 % of respondents believe that the abuse and neglect of children they don't know has an impact on them personally, and only 41.8% accurately perceive this small norm. Of course, what impacts society and our economy – crime, health care costs, school performance – does in fact affect Americans in a very personal way.

*Recommendation: Correct the misperception that child abuse and neglect does not have a powerful impact on the lives of every individual American. Spread the message that the abuse and neglect of children affects us all. There is truly no such thing as other people's children.*

### **Familiarity with Prevent Child Abuse America**

Respondents to both surveys reported high levels of recognition of Prevent Child Abuse America. More than a quarter of 2014 respondents (26.2%) reported having heard of Prevent Child Abuse America prior to the survey. Nearly a third (31.8%) said they were familiar with the organization in the 2015 survey.

#### Characteristics of Respondents Familiar with Prevent Child Abuse America

The odds ratios listed below provide useful information about the characteristics of people who are familiar with Prevent Child Abuse America.

- Age: Individuals between the ages of 30-64 were at least 2 times more likely to have heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today than those who are 18-29 or 65+.
- Education: Individuals with a college degree were 5.6 times more likely to have heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today than those who do not have a college degree.
- Parental Status: Individuals who are parents are 3.1 times more likely to have heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today than those who are not parents.
- Mandatory Reporters: Individuals who are mandatory reporters of child abuse are 15 times more likely to have heard of Prevent Child Abuse America than those who are not.
- Perception of Severity of Problem: Individuals who have heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today were 3.1 times more likely to think that child abuse and neglect is a serious problem in their community than those who had not heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today.
- Perception of Beliefs of Others: Individuals who have heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today were 2.44 times more likely to think most adults think child abuse and

neglect is a serious problem in their community than those who had not heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today.

- Suspicion of Child Abuse: Individuals who have heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today were 2.6 times more likely to have ever suspected that a child was being abused or neglected than those who had not heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today.
- Community Involvement: Individuals who have heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today were 2 times more likely volunteer with kids through places of worship, schools, sports or clubs than those who had not heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today.
- Political Involvement: Individuals who have heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today were 2.3 times more likely to have taken a stand for programs and policies that support children and families through voting, letter-writing, meeting attendance, or other activities than those who had not heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today.
- Volunteering: Individuals who have heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today were 2.45 times more likely to have donated goods, money, or time to organizations that support children and families than those who had not heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today.
- Mentorship: Individuals who have heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today were 2.6 times more likely to have been a mentor to children in your family neighborhood or community than those who had not heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today.
- Child Abuse Prevention: Individuals who have heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today were 5.6 times more likely to report that they have been active in the prevention of child abuse and neglect than those who had not heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today.
- Impact of Child Abuse: Individuals who have heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today were 2.7 times more likely to say that abuse and neglect of children they do not know personally has an impact on them than those who had not heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today.
- Intervention: Individuals who suspected child abuse or neglect and took action are 2 times more likely to have heard of Prevent Child Abuse America before today than those who have not suspected child abuse or neglect and did not take action.

*Recommendation: These statistical correlations could be used to identify audiences, grow support, and design strategies to reach those who are not typically aware of Prevent Child Abuse America. There are also intriguing correlations between familiarity with Prevent Child Abuse America and protective attitudes and actions. Further study is required to determine the nature of these relationships, but it is possible that the work of building awareness of the organization, its mission, and its goals could itself be protective in nature.*



## **Recommendations, Possible Actions, and Next Steps**

The 2015 survey results point towards norms, environmental, and outreach strategies Prevent Child Abuse America could use to change the national conversation about abuse and neglect in a way that could make it safer for children. The recommendations included in this key findings report are summarized below.

1. Americans believe that child abuse and neglect happens more frequently in the country as a whole than it does in their own communities. Educate people that child abuse does not just happen in other, unknown places, but right in their own neighborhoods -- and that there are actions they can take to prevent it and to intervene when it happens.
2. Significant misperceptions exist about the frequency with which people intervene when they suspect child abuse or neglect. Correcting this misperception will give Americans a more accurate – and positive – understanding of who they are, which can change the public conversation and impact individual behavior around child abuse and neglect.
3. There is a correlation between people’s perceptions about the actions of others and their own actions. The number two predictor of whether individuals had ever suspected child abuse is their perception of how often most others have done so. This powerful correlation demonstrates that perceptions of social norms matter. Perceptions of social norms are a powerful avenue for changing the national attitudes and behaviors regarding child abuse and neglect.
4. Promote participation in mentorship programs, involvement in political action campaigns, and support of organizations that support children and families to increase the percentage of Americans who take action when they suspect child abuse or neglect.
5. There is an opportunity to educate the public about what it means to be active in the prevention of child abuse and neglect – that providing role models, recreation, volunteer and other support is in fact a means of prevention. Prevent Child Abuse America can help people realize the role they already play in keeping kids safe, and encourage them to do more.
6. Only 38.6% of respondents have ever taken a stand for programs and policies that support children and families through voting, letter-writing, or meeting attendance. Prevent Child Abuse America should find ways to facilitate this type of political involvement among American adults, perhaps through online petitions, simple phone and text action alerts, and other simplified means for getting people engaged around programs and policies that support children and families.
7. Research conducted by Prevent Child Abuse America in the 1990s showed that politicians underestimate how important the issue of child welfare is to voters. The 2015 survey likewise showed that the majority of Americans feel that voting for candidates who prioritize children and families is very important -- yet they misperceive that this belief is the norm. By correcting this misperception, Prevent Child Abuse America could turn up the volume on issues related to children

and families in the national political conversation and help increase the strength of this strong attitudinal norm.

8. Most Americans believe that the presence of one concerned adult who is willing to help can protect a child from abuse and neglect. Encourage people to “be the one” that makes a difference. Remind them that their actions can change children’s lives.

9. The majority of Americans understand that child abuse and neglect has macro effects on society and the economy, but far fewer realize that this means child abuse and neglect also has a powerful impact on the lives of every individual American. Spread the message that the abuse and neglect of children affects us all.

10. There are intriguing correlations between familiarity with Prevent Child Abuse America and protective attitudes and actions. These statistical correlations could be used to identify audiences, grow support, and design strategies to reach those who are not typically aware of Prevent Child Abuse America.

11. More research should be conducted to establish current benchmark levels of childhood and adult exposure to and intervention in cases of child abuse and neglect. It would be wise to develop core questions on these constructs that could then be included in other surveys. Continue to build Positive Community Norms research to identify misperception gaps that could be leveraged to change attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors around this critical issue.

