

How Long Do Stars Shine?

We wish all children grew up in a safe, secure, trustworthy home and neighborhood, where they were sure to get well fed, well loved and well protected. That's the fuel kids need in order to like themselves, trust others and work for success. The reality for many of our youngest generation is far more ominous. Think of the children behind these facts:

Each year in the United States, a million or more children are confirmed victims of maltreatment (including physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect).

As many children die each year from child abuse in America as soldiers die battling our two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Child abuse occurs at every socioeconomic level, every ethnic and cultural group, all religions and all levels of education.

One third of all adults who abuse or neglect their children, one third of all women in prison and the majority of people in drug rehab programs were abused or neglected when they were children.

The conservative estimate of the annual direct cost of treating victims of child maltreatment is well over \$100 billion. The associated costs of dealing with the perpetrators, other family members affected, school failure, lost earning potential and crime is many multiples of that figure.

The brain and nervous system of children who suffer early and repeated trauma, whether physical or emotional, undergo changes in wiring that often leaves them, even as adults, likely to undermine their chances for health, school success, career advancement, economic security and personal happiness.

While it is saddening to discover that the United States of America reports one of the highest rates of child abuse and neglect among the world's wealthiest nations, it is much harder to understand why so many parents endanger their dependent children. Hard as we try to identify individuals and groups more likely to victimize their children, we are not very good at predicting who might endanger their children's future. Anyway, labeling and treating some people as being more likely to harm their kids might backfire by creating distrust of support systems among parents who may most need a helping hand. Since child maltreatment occurs among all sectors of our population, it is much easier, fairer and cheaper to offer childrearing skills and resources to all parents.

If we accept that prevention has the advantage of helping families before problems take root, we might recognize an additional opportunity. Instead of trying to predict who needs more help with rearing their children, we could recognize which supports all families deserve in order to give their children a secure, positive start to life. Looking for where to begin, I would suggest insuring that every family has the basic resources needed to offer their children the foundation for success: a sense of security, dignity, hope and purpose. Healthy, happy and hopeful children come from families who are socially connected to others in their community, who earn a livable wage that supports their families' needs and who pass on a spirit of security, optimism and ambition.

Is it beyond this wealthiest of nations to provide every citizen, starting from birth, with the tools needed to make a secure life for oneself and one's family? We are still the only nation in the developed world that excludes large numbers of citizens from their human right to basic health care, education, housing and freedom from poverty. How does this relate to preventing child maltreatment? Every parent who ever had a bad day or a sleepless night knows how hard it is to control our emotions and reactions when our children cross the boundaries we set for their behavior. Imagine how much harder it would be if, between your child and your nerves, you had nobody's shoulder to lean on, no one's ear to talk to, no secure job to help pay the bills and no insurance to cover unanticipated illness, accident or misfortune.

But what about the matter of cost? The right answer is that we cannot afford the cost of not preventing child maltreatment. Consider the economic consequences of just a few preventable conditions. Each prematurely born infant runs up tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars in hospital bills (premature babies and developmentally delayed children are also more likely to be victimized and, as adults, more likely to give birth to infants at risk for health and developmental problems). Every unemployed parent not only contributes little to the public treasury, he or she cannot adequately feed, clothe, shelter or transport children or inspire them with hope for their future. And every child who enters school weakened by the disgrace of hunger, anxiety, depression or shame is condemned to under-perform, is more likely to drop out before graduating, is less likely to earn a livable wage and is more likely to end up with an unwanted pregnancy, a prison record or a chronic and debilitating health problem. Already, the rising demand for foster care, special education, juvenile prison, medical and psychiatric day and residential treatment programs, drug rehabilitation and treatment of intentional and unintentional injuries exceeds the capacity to administer

and pay for these services. In the current era of receding public revenues and resultant service reductions, we need policies and resources that promote child well-being and positive child outcomes.

Health, happiness and success in life start with loving families, caring neighbors and healthy communities. In turn, safe and prosperous communities need secure, capable and motivated citizens. It's time to break out some common sense before we break the public bank. Re-growing the economy begins by nurturing our children. And investing in families, all families, is the rightful way to leave no child behind.