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## **Gorski Discusses Tips to Prevent Child Maltreatment**

**TAMPA, FL** – Peter A. Gorski, M.D., M.P.A., child development expert at the Children's Board of Hillsborough County, a pediatrician and a professor of pediatrics, public health and psychiatry at the University of South Florida, offers the following tips concerning signs of childhood depression:

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 our children and the consequences for all of us are far more ominous.

### **What Represents Child Maltreatment?**

The legal definition of child abuse is an act, or failure to act, on the part of a parent or caretaker that results in the death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation of a child, or which places the child in an imminent risk of serious harm (42 U.S.C.A. § 5106g). Child-abuse laws raise difficult legal and political issues, pitting the right of children to be free from harm, on the one hand, against the right of families to privacy and the rights of parents to raise and discipline their children without government interference, on the other.

### **How Big a Problem Is It?**

It's an enormous problem in the U.S. Every 10 seconds another child is reported to be abused (more than a million a year). Seven children die every day from intentional injuries or neglect. Most children know their abusers. Maltreatment occurs at every level of income and education, and within every ethnicity, culture and religion. A third of all prisoners and most people in drug rehab programs were abused as children. Child abuse often occurs in association with domestic violence. The annual cost of child maltreatment in the U.S. is over \$100 billion. None of us are safe and all of us pay a high price for the damage behind these shocking statistics.

## **How Does Maltreatment Harm Kids?**

All types of child abuse and neglect leave lasting scars. While some scars are physical, emotional effects can last throughout life, injuring a child's sense of self, ability to have healthy relationships, and to function at home, work or school. Children who can't trust their parents have trouble trusting and feeling safe with anyone else. If you hear repeatedly that you are stupid, ugly or no good, you come to doubt your worth. Sexual abuse victims often feel especially damaged. Maltreated children cannot express emotions safely. As adults, they then struggle with unexplained anxiety, depression or anger. Too many turn to drugs and alcohol to numb their painful feelings.

## **What Are Some Warning Signs of Child Maltreatment?**

Emotional abuse often results in children showing withdrawn, fearful or anxious behavior. They may act in extreme ways – compliant and passive or demanding and aggressive. They may seem unattached to family. They may act either inappropriately adult-like or infantile.

Physically abused children may be nervous and vigilant around adults. They may have frequent unexplained bruises, cuts or other injuries and wear unusual clothing to cover up these wounds. They might avoid human touch.

Sexually abused children often don't take care of their appearance or their health. They may soil themselves. They may talk or act sexually precociously or avoid physical contact.

All maltreated children are prone to sleep problems, changes in appetite, school underachievement, anxiety and depression.

## **How Can You Help a Child Who Has Suffered Maltreatment?**

Offer calm reassurance and unconditional support. They did nothing wrong to deserve this. Remember that it may be difficult for the child to talk about the abuse so don't interrogate them. Be patient. Make a confidential, even an anonymous report to the public authorities. Seek professional guidance and protection for the child (and others, if needed).

## **How Can You Help Prevent Child Maltreatment?**

Be a nurturing parent – children need to know that they are special, loved and capable of success.

Help a friend, neighbor or relative take care of children – we all need rest and social replenishment when we feel overwhelmed.

Learn the meaning of children's behavior at each stage of development and how to effectively respond, starting with an infant's crying.

Advocate for your community to create, organize and maintain safe, open, fun places, events and associations for children and families to gather.

Support school programs, like the Child Abuse Council's "Kids on the Block," that help young children acknowledge and get help with sensitive matters that threaten their physical or emotional safety.

Monitor your child's TV and internet viewing to prevent exposure to degrading content or dangerous contacts.

Health, happiness and success in life start with loving families, caring neighbors and healthy communities. Each of us can help brighten the life of a child. If, together, we leave no child behind, we may truly safeguard the future.

*(Peter A. Gorski, M.D., M.P.A., is a child development expert at the Children's Board of Hillsborough County, a pediatrician, and a professor of pediatrics, public health and psychiatry at the University of South Florida.)*

*The Children's Board of Hillsborough County serves as the leading voice and advocate for children and families in our community. The board is the only organization of its kind in Hillsborough County that generates revenue to help children and families. The Children's Board is recognized nationally for its contributions to best practices in policies and programs aiding children and families. Citizens may visit [www.childrensboard.org](http://www.childrensboard.org) to learn more about the board's programs.*

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