

A New Way of Thinking About Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention

by James M. Hmurovich

Executive Summary

No issue is more ripe for change than the prevention of child abuse and neglect. The path to effective policy change involves a 180-degree shift in thinking – from policies that deal with abuse and neglect after they take place, to policies that focus on preventing their occurrence. For our nation to embrace prevention of child abuse and neglect in a more effective and meaningful manner, six steps must be taken.

- Step One: Help the public recognize and understand the connection between child abuse and neglect and other social ills.
- Step Two: Establish a national child abuse and neglect prevention policy.
- Step Three: Analyze existing funding sources and develop fiscal policies to support activities that prevent child abuse and neglect.
- Step Four: Cultivate multiple and diverse prevention champions to rally the public support necessary to change policies to prevent child abuse and neglect.
- Step Five: Identify and strengthen governmental planning and quality assurance activities that support a national policy on child abuse and neglect prevention.
- Step Six: Ensure effective state and local planning and implementation of child abuse and neglect prevention strategies.

Our collective failure to implement effective policies and strategies to prevent child abuse and neglect costs taxpayers \$104 billion per year and that sum does not consider the personal toll on the victimized child.¹ Research shows that child abuse and neglect have life-long consequences, not only for the victimized child, but for the nation.² These studies show a strong correlation between child abuse and neglect and debilitating and chronic health consequences, delinquency, criminal behavior, mental health illness, drug dependency, and lower academic performance. Child abuse and neglect are serious national problems affecting families regardless of wealth.

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Many recent initiatives and efforts have focused on improving the child protection system. These efforts have resulted in more people looking at prevention strategies as a means to decrease the escalating need and costs incurred for services after the abuse and neglect have occurred. These efforts also provide an opportunity to view the child protection system as a part of a continuum that must include services on the front-end. The current situation can allow policy makers to move the dial closer to more universal prevention strategies. The central question that policy makers must focus on is: What can be done to move policy to prevention, so all children have the opportunity to grow up in a healthy environment that prepares them for adulthood?

By establishing a national policy on the prevention of child abuse and neglect, coordinated state service systems can be developed that promote healthy child and family development and ultimately a higher quality of community functioning.

The Current Context of Child Abuse and Neglect

Since 1993, market research indicates that more than nine out of 10 Americans view child abuse and neglect as serious problems. Research as recent as March 2008³ indicates that:

- 59 percent of Americans view child abuse and neglect as problems in their community;
- 29 percent view child abuse and neglect as problems in their family; and,
- The 48 percent who believe that child abuse and neglect can be prevented had diverse opinions on how to prevent maltreatment. Many of the suggestions focused on criminal punishment of the adult perpetrator or other after-the-fact solutions, but not prevention strategies that prevent the abuse or neglect from occurring.

The same research also suggests that much of what the public hears about certain child abuse and neglect prevention messages supports a belief that the government cannot be effective in addressing this critical issue. It is clear that child abuse and neglect prevention messaging must communicate practical solutions that engage the public without leaving it feeling overwhelmed with a sense of hopelessness.

Prevention messages must convey an understanding that child abuse and neglect include more than sexual abuse/incest or “stranger danger.” They must illustrate the need to help families feeling pressures and stresses, and unable to cope with the demands of parenthood because of substance abuse, depression and other mental health concerns, violent home life, poverty, or lack of resources. A prevention message must incorporate the importance of the kind of community services and intensive interventions provided within a comprehensive array of services, including home visitation, crisis respite care, parent education, and parent support groups.

In 2007, a UNICEF report⁴ ranked the United States 20th in child well-being out of the world's 21 wealthiest nations. The measures used by UNICEF – educational, health and safety, material, and family and peer well being – can reduce the potential for child maltreatment. We as a nation have responded decisively whenever our economic stability or national security has been threatened. We have not responded with the same sense of urgency and resolve when our nation's children are abused or neglected. This situation unfortunately may not be that surprising since the United States does not have a comprehensive policy or strategy to prevent the abuse and neglect of our nation's children.

The absence of a comprehensive policy is not the result of a lack of information about child abuse and neglect. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issues a “Child Maltreatment Report”⁵ each year providing information on the characteristics of children who are maltreated and by whom. Research is abundant on the precipitating factors of child abuse and neglect, and much is known about successful prevention strategies. Despite this wealth of information, efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect have been inconsistent. Believing child abuse and neglect are national problems is not enough. We must establish a national policy to prevent it, plan a deliberate and thoughtful implementation strategy to accomplish it, ensure an adequate financing mechanism to pay for it, and develop a mechanism to build the capacity of states to sustain it. Our nation's children, regardless of their means, deserve nothing less.

Six Steps

1. Help the public recognize and understand the many connections between child abuse and neglect and other social ills.

The public recognizes that child abuse and neglect should be prevented, but there is not a consistent understanding of child abuse and neglect prevention. Clarity in message is critical to ensure that we focus on the same issue consistently, so we as a nation can respond effectively to the needs of children and families before abuse or neglect ever happens.

Corporate America spends billions of dollars annually to introduce and maintain its various brands. Corporate leaders understand the importance of branding, and the impact branding has on their ability to successfully market products to consumers. No such brand identity currently exists for the prevention of child abuse and neglect. To address the issue, child abuse and neglect prevention must be understood uniformly, and the message must be to prevent child abuse and neglect from ever happening. Through this branding, education and information can help the public uniformly understand child abuse and neglect prevention, including the benefits of prevention as well as the adverse consequences of failing to achieve it.

2. Establish a national child abuse and neglect prevention policy.

Our national policy must be guided by a belief that child abuse and neglect are not only problems, but can be prevented. A prevention strategy may be actualized through individual acts of kindness to neighbors and strangers, but sustainable change cannot occur until there is a national policy and commitment to prevent child abuse and neglect. It must be the responsibility of public officials and communities to create a norm of supporting children and families. Until a national policy is developed and communicated, states will be hampered in developing and implementing local coordinated service systems that promote healthy child, family, and community development.

3. Analyze existing funding sources and develop fiscal policies to support activities that prevent child abuse and neglect.

To implement a national child abuse and neglect prevention policy, it is essential that funding streams be assessed and then realigned. In local implementation activities, policy and funding decisions would be governed by the national policy so financing decisions are made that: 1) promote the national policy, and 2) are accompanied by clearly identified, measurable, and results-oriented strategies.

To develop this financing system, we must broaden the current service system for children and families to fully incorporate services that focus on preventing child abuse and neglect. The challenge is how to transform the current service system that responds to child abuse and neglect after it happens into coordinated systems that provide services to all families before child abuse and neglect occur. It is neither feasible nor advisable to simply transfer funding from services and programs that are offered after the child abuse or neglect has occurred. It would shortchange children who have experienced abuse or neglect, and make a bad situation for them worse.

Our nation must determine on a state-by-state basis (and sometimes on a community-by-community basis) how the transformation can take place to a coordinated system that provides services to all families before child abuse or neglect happens. Any transformation must occur within the context of multiple factors: the nuances of state laws and administrative codes; the capacity of current service delivery systems; funding priorities; other competing public policy interests; the extent to which local, state or federal funds pay for a specific service or strategy and the leadership characteristics of the ranking elected official.

This transformation can only be accomplished through a state-by-state assessment and planning and implementation based on the national policy, and measured by thoughtfully established national outcomes.

Individual jurisdictions and policy makers develop budgets taking into account legislative mandates related to the use of the funds. When funding criteria are not based on clear public policy, the results achieved from the use of the funds

most likely will not advance the policy. The absence of a consistent national policy hampers communities in developing local implementation, in financing strategies, and in attaining positive results for children and families.

We must ask: What type of nation and society do we wish to live in, and what are the critical success factors to attain that vision? Once this question is answered, fiscal policies and management decisions must be implemented to support and provide incentives to promote the public policy, not vice versa. Change of this nature takes time and often transcends the term(s) of an elected official. By developing a thoughtful, bi-partisan, and multi-branch national policy, we increase the potential for success even when leadership changes. Services for children must be viewed as investments, not expenditures, and credible cost benefit analyses must be developed to demonstrate the value of the investment.

4. Cultivate multiple and diverse prevention champions to rally the public support necessary to change policies to prevent child abuse and neglect.

The president of the United States and state and local government leaders should be the leading champions of children. Platforms developed for political campaigns and initiatives frequently support the notion that children are our future, and that we as a nation should embrace and support family and community development. Often times, however, these campaign platforms fall by the wayside once the rigors of balanced budgets and the realities of governance take hold. It is not that public figures are insincere; often specific initiatives are accomplished, but they are small victories for children and families who have much greater needs.

These champions must identify other leaders who can promote the implementation and sustainability of the national policy to prevent child abuse and neglect. Prevention champions can be found in “children’s cabinets” or legislative caucuses that are bi-cameral and bi-partisan. Additionally, the leader can designate key members of the administration, such as the deputy chief of staff and a deputy budget director, to promote the integration of administration policy across departments, encourage strong best practice information sharing, identify common assessment and service delivery strategies, and encourage fiscal accountability and efficiency that promote the national policy for children.

An administration can provide leadership, but it cannot be the sole voice for the answers. Administrations need to avail themselves of the expertise of agencies, national organizations, and individuals in pediatric, public health, public safety, and educational areas that have credible and informed thoughts, opinions, and proven leadership. Leadership should ideally “start at the top,” but it should be complimented by leadership spanning all professions and diverse areas of interest, and it should involve service providers as highly visible spokespersons. It also is the responsibility of interested individuals to come together to promote change in public will regarding child abuse and neglect prevention so that leadership at the top ultimately will assume the responsibility that comes with their authority.

5. Identify and strengthen governmental planning and quality assurance activities that support the national policy on child abuse and neglect prevention.

Many existing government efforts that benefit children can be used to promote and support a clearly stated national policy to prevent child abuse and neglect. One of the most common and perhaps underutilized strategies is the use of state plans. These are documents used by states to draw down federal matching funds such as Title IV-B (Child Welfare Services), Title IV-E (Foster Care), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to improve family economics, Medicaid, Maternal and Child Health, and the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems plan. Strong federal guidance and appropriate financial incentives should be established so that states develop these plans in a manner that integrates cross-disciplinary planning and service delivery systems, and focus on nationally approved child well-being outcomes (not output indicators) that prevent child abuse and neglect.

These state plans can be powerful tools to promote child abuse and neglect prevention by focusing on attaining outcomes such as healthy child development, success in school, and appropriate community interactions. States also should be encouraged to develop plans for a robust integrated planning process for juvenile justice and community-based prevention funding. Each of these plans has elements that relate to child abuse and neglect prevention, but without a national policy focus, an opportunity is missed to create more seamless coordinated service systems. At the same time, quality assurance processes such as the federal Child Services and Family Review (CSFR) required by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) could be expanded to hold the child welfare system accountable in the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

6. Ensure effective state and local planning and implementation of child abuse and neglect prevention strategies.

The development of a comprehensive, thoughtful national policy to prevent child abuse and neglect must be undertaken immediately. With that policy in place, real and sustainable change can then be initiated on a state-by-state basis. The focus should be on each state implementing comprehensive, evidence-based, community-driven child abuse and neglect prevention strategies based upon the state's needs. With an emphasis on healthy child, family and community development, a state could develop benchmarks and measures to assess progress and demonstrate to the public what is being accomplished. These plans cannot merely be a written document, they should be a well-developed process that encourages states to look at inter-agency policy integration, shared funding among the various service delivery systems, information sharing, and common goals. These state plans must be a methodology to view prevention services as more than a funding stream or specific program, and instead, as an entirely new way of thinking about the long-term safety, health, growth, development, and well-being of our nation's children.

Successes have been achieved through the use of the public health model to address such issues as tobacco cessation and the prevention of diabetes and cancer. These models may be instructive in statewide child abuse and neglect prevention planning. The model includes steps that define the problem, identify risk and protective factors, develop and test strategies, and promote widespread adoption of those strategies. Some states have already taken some of these steps, and state child abuse and neglect prevention planning can build upon this foundation. Statewide prevention planning must be more than a call to action; it must provide the framework to implement and sustain a complete transformation of an outdated service delivery system that finances strategies and a patchwork of related but uncoordinated children's policies. State prevention planning must become a blueprint for change based upon a clear understanding of prevention and the development of fiscal policies that support the child abuse and neglect national prevention policy.

This statewide prevention planning process represents a multi-year effort that should focus on two objectives:

- Understanding the current status of prevention in the state; and
- Addressing the actions identified in this paper to initiate and sustain child abuse and neglect prevention strategies.

A clearly understood national policy for child abuse and neglect prevention must be established and executed with vigor and commitment. Our nation must act on the belief that child abuse and neglect are national problems, but more importantly, that they are preventable, and that the real work lies within our states and communities.

We must initiate a new way of thinking about prevention, and we can do this by achieving the six steps specified in this paper. It must be a way of thinking that encompasses a concrete understanding of how children, families, and communities develop, and what adversely impacts that development, or conversely, what promotes that development.

The public also must understand and accept values that attach responsibility for child development beyond the family. The quality of relationships with teachers, childcare providers, friends, and neighbors do matter, and therefore, are critical not only to healthy child and family development, but to ensure the kind of healthy community development that we all expect.⁶

State prevention planning not only promotes these goals, it provides a blueprint for our nation to attain global leadership in the ethical treatment of children; a most honorable goal.

¹ Wang, CT, & Holton, J (2007). *Total estimated cost of child abuse and neglect in the United States*. Chicago, IL: Prevent Child Abuse America. http://www.preventchildabuse.org/about_us/media_releases/pcaa_pew_economic_impact_study_final.pdf

² Felitti, VJ, Anda, RF, Nordenberg, D, Williamson, DF, Spitz, AM, Edwards, V, Koss, MP, & Marks, JS. (1998). The relationship of adult health status to childhood abuse and household dysfunction. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14, 245–258. <http://download.journals.elsevierhealth.com/pdfs/journals/07493797/PIIS0749379798000178.pdf>

³ Specht, Bryan. (March 2008). *Breaking the Resistance: Creating a Movement for Prevention*. Presented to Prevent Child Abuse America, Chicago, Illinois.

⁴ United Nations Children’s Fund (2007). *Child Poverty in Perspective: An overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries*. Innocenti Report Card 7, UNICEF Innocenti Research Center, Florence, Italy, p. 2. <http://www.unicef.org/media/files/ChildPovertyReport.pdf>

⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families (2008). *Child Maltreatment 2006*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm06/cm06.pdf>

⁶ Davey, Lynn. (July 2008). FrameWorks Institute. Commissioned work for Prevent Child Abuse America.