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An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure

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April is Child Abuse Prevention Month. And if the stress of thinking about child abuse and neglect dampens your spring day, imagine how the stress of being abused and neglected affects a child. The trauma to a child doesn't come just from incidents of physical or sexual abuse -- the kind that often grab the attention of the media and public and result in calls for action against child abusers. In fact, a child can suffer just as much long-term damage from growing up in a dysfunctional family where the child is subjected to chronic neglect or an environment rife with substance abuse or domestic violence.

A recent Centers for Disease Control study of 17,000 adults provides strong evidence that childhood abuse and neglect can lead to adult alcoholism, drug addiction, suicide, and violence. The child doesn't even have to suffer the abuse directly; the more children witness domestic violence between the adults in their home, the more likely they are to suffer long-term emotional damage.

If you read the recent medical studies demonstrating how children's brains develop, it makes sense that a toxic home life can cause a child permanent damage. The child's body responds to chronic stress by releasing high levels of adrenaline, cortisol, and other stress hormones, and these hormones can impair the development of the brain. Stress can stunt the child's brain growth and lead to a child who is learning-disabled and impulsive and who overreacts when confronted with a problem. When these children enter the school system, they may become the ones who fall behind in class and are labeled "behavior problems" by teachers.

Societal problems such as poverty likely exacerbate the trauma these children experience. According to a recent New York Times article, research suggests the stress of living in poverty can trigger the flow of these toxic hormones and limit children's brain development.

We know our child welfare systems respond to reports of physical and sexual abuse, but how well are those systems geared toward addressing the less obvious but more chronic problems of family dysfunction, substance abuse, and domestic violence? The CDC report suggests some steps that can help:

- ◆ Training daycare providers, teachers to identify and care for children who have been exposed to traumatic childhood experiences and empowering them to make appropriate referrals for additional services those children need;
- ◆ Ensuring that when our child protection agencies conduct a child abuse investigation, that they assess each child's developmental status;
- ◆ Making available appropriate counseling and other services for children exposed to toxic stress.

If you look at the numbers, it's clear that many more young children experience chronic neglect than experience intentional abuse. The CDC reports that of all cases last year involving maltreatment of very young infants under one week old, 68.5% involved neglect. Imagine the effects that a child would experience if that neglect lasted throughout the first five years of his or her life.

Here in Georgia, as throughout the nation, our child protective services agencies are making efforts to keep neglected children with their families whenever that's possible. But if children are to remain in a troubled home environment, how are we to ensure not only child safety but also child health and well-being? The key, as the CDC suggests, is to provide services early and often. We must continue to build programs that identify weaknesses and build strengths in families with very young children, and that identify and care for traumatized children. We must ensure that our child protective services agencies understand and respond to the long-term effects of dysfunctional homes. And we must give schools and communities the resources they need to provide counseling and health services to troubled children.

As adults, our chief mission both as individuals and as a society should be to raise a next generation of healthy, productive, and responsible adults. The science just confirms what we already knew: "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

To learn more about how childhood trauma and neglect affect the developing brain, read the CDC report at http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/pub-res/pdf/Childhood_Stress.pdf or visit www.developingchild.net. And to find out more that you can do to prevent child abuse, check out the resources available at the Prevent Child Abuse Georgia website, www.ppageorgia.org.

Tom Rawlings, Georgia's Child Advocate for the Protection of Children, was appointed by Governor Sonny Perdue to assure quality and efficiency in Georgia's child protective systems. The Office of Child Advocate is a resource for those interested in the welfare of our state's neglected and abused children. Tom can be reached through the OCA website at www.gachildadvocate.org