



West Virginia's Most Critical Question:

How Do We Keep Our Children
**Free From Abuse
and Neglect?**

A Guide for Community Discussion and Action



Prepared by:



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West Virginia
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Welcome to the Discussion!

Prevent Child Abuse West Virginia and community Partners in Prevention teams are working together to organize community discussions on “*West Virginia’s Most Critical Question: How Do We Keep Our Children Free From Abuse and Neglect?*” This discussion guide was developed from current research about proven solutions to the problem and the experiences of West Virginia community partners working to build communities that protect children and strengthen families. The purpose of the discussion is to work together to:

- Better understand the issue of the prevention of child abuse and neglect.
- Consider the benefits and drawbacks of different approaches.
- Identify actions that are likely to make a positive difference.
- Examine the roles of government, schools, businesses, and civic and religious groups, as well as our own responsibility as individuals; and
- Explore potential next steps.

It is hoped that the ideas from each discussion will lead to action, and that a growing group of people will recognize the link between child and community well-being. Even small actions can create a growing base of supporters who care about children and create support for initiatives that help our state have a successful and prosperous future.

Prevent Child Abuse West Virginia

Prevent Child Abuse West Virginia (PCA-WV) works to give children good beginnings by strengthening families and communities. This is done by implementing innovative strategies in the areas of effective programs, public engagement and sound public policy. Prevent Child Abuse West Virginia is a chapter of Prevent Child Abuse America and a project of TEAM for West Virginia Children, a Huntington-based nonprofit organization and recognized leader in local child abuse prevention programs.

Partners in Prevention is a unique model of communities working together to strengthen families and help West Virginia’s children grow up free from abuse and neglect. Community teams across the state participate in this program of educational workshops, networking and mini-grants. The goals of the teams are to prevent child abuse and neglect by raising awareness, developing and expanding effective services and informing policymakers. The Partners in Prevention Community Grants are supported by The West Virginia Children’s Trust Fund, the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation and the WV Department of Health and Human Resources.

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Parents need access to support and information that helps them understand and deal with the challenges of child development and provide their children with the resources they need to thrive.

Approach 2:

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Systems already in place do a lot to support children and families but they have limitations that keep every family from getting the help they need. There are few systems that focus on prevention. Better collaboration and family strengthening practices may help to prevent child abuse and neglect.

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The community environment impacts a family’s ability to protect and provide for its children. Family-centered community building can mobilize citizens to work together for mutual well-being.

Introduction

Why is this West Virginia's Most Critical Question?

The future of West Virginia quite clearly hinges on the effective prevention of child abuse and neglect. Our state is challenged by the problem of maltreatment. According to 2006 statistics by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, West Virginia has the third highest rate in the nation for substantiated cases of abuse and neglect.

Child abuse and neglect is a difficult and highly emotional issue. We inherently want to see our community's children protected and we have strong feelings about how to deal with situations when children are harmed. We all agree that every child should grow up free from abuse and neglect. Not only is this a moral certainty, it is an issue of mutual well-being and prosperity.

There are obvious financial costs that can be seen as a consequence of abuse and neglect in West Virginia. More than 4,000 children every year are in the foster care system, receiving support and care services to mitigate the impact of abuse and neglect in their lives. Many children will never be independent of their need for assistance to deal with the emotional and physical impact of their abuse.

There is no more devastating interruption in the developing potential of a person than maltreatment in childhood. Early experiences in life are the foundation for everything that comes next. Positive, nurturing childhood experiences yield positive adult outcomes such as success in school, work and life. Negative, stressful childhood experiences yield negative adult outcomes such as risky health behaviors, dependence on social programs and economic struggle.

In the past, our way of dealing with the problem has been to address it *after* the abuse has taken place, by pouring money into crisis intervention programs, stiffer criminal penalties and extended jail sentences for offenders. But none of these measures can undo the irreparable harm to the brain architecture of those impacted by toxic stress in their childhood.

The implications for West Virginia's future are enormous. If we have the third highest rate of child abuse in the nation, there are the logical consequences for our future workforce and the demands on state financial resources. Seen in this light, the question of how we prevent child abuse and neglect is a critical question that affects everyone.

The key is to focus on strategies that keep child maltreatment from happening in the first place. It may be difficult at first to picture what this could look like. But proven strategies do exist and they are already present in your community.

Did you know that an after-school program is prevention? That a parenting support group is prevention? Even a Little League baseball team can be prevention.

All of these activities help support families and give them the tools they need to be effective parents. They build a sense of community where everyone has a role to play in providing for the well-being of children.

Ecological Model of Parenting

Every child is part of a family. Every family is part of a community. Communities and families are supported by government, economic and social systems. To prevent child abuse and neglect we must reinforce the protective factors in every realm of a child's world.



Identifying Prevention

Researchers have identified key elements of family and community activities that work effectively to protect and nurture the growth of children. These “protective factors” can be seen in action in an adult education class or a child care setting. They include the following:

Parental Resilience: The ability to cope and bounce back from all types of challenges.

Social Connections : Friends, family members, neighbors, and other members of a community who provide emotional support and concrete assistance to parents.

Knowledge of parenting and child development: Accurate information about raising young children and appropriate expectations for their behavior.

Concrete support in times of need: Financial security to cover day-to-day expenses and unexpected costs that come up from time to time, access to formal supports like CHIP, and informal support from social networks.

Children's social and emotional development: A child's ability to interact positively with others and communicate his or her emotions effectively.

It's common sense. When protective factors are present and strong in a family, the likelihood of child maltreatment is dramatically reduced.

Prevention Challenges

Unlike breast cancer or diabetes, we actually know HOW to prevent child abuse and neglect. There are a number of proven strategies for doing this. The work is slowed, however, by a lack of committed resources for prevention. A recent economic impact study from the Pew Charitable Trust reports that only 10% of child welfare spending is for prevention. Reform efforts have been slow to gain traction. There are many thoughts as to why this is happening:

- The public struggles with the idea of “prevention” – what it looks like, what works best and a clear definition of their personal roles and responsibilities.
- Existing prevention programs struggle to do their work. Lack of funding, capacity and political support has kept most efforts small, disjointed and underfunded. Many do not stay in operation long enough to demonstrate their success or prove their worth.
- There is still high public emotion and support for the punishment of offenders as a prevention solution. Research shows that these methods are most costly than other prevention efforts and yield little result.
- The public has a necessary role in the prevention of child abuse and neglect but public values about the “sanctity of the family” often prevent action. Also, the public has yet to come to terms with the permanent impact that abuse and neglect has on a developing child. Abuse cannot be overcome by an individual's sheer will power or without great effort and expense.
- There is a tendency to blame government for not doing more, but there are actually very few government systems in place to support prevention programs and activities. The child welfare system is designed to intervene after children are harmed and is not an appropriate system for doing the things necessary to strengthen families. A better system could provide needed funding, training, quality controls and other supports to community prevention programs.

Where Do We Start?

The question of how we *begin* a large-scale prevention effort is ambiguous, but one thing is very clear – we can no longer afford to do nothing about the problem.

- The cost of intervention after children have been abused is rising and rapidly becoming unaffordable for the state.
- West Virginia needs to be prepared to compete in the global economy. The educational outcomes for children who have been abused and neglected and are in the child welfare system are very poor.
- Other states are increasing their investments in prevention. Federal grant programs are requiring prevention efforts. West Virginia is falling behind in this important area of work for children and may miss critical opportunities.

So how do we get started?

This discussion will focus on three possible approaches to the prevention of child abuse and neglect .

Approach 1. Provide support and information to parents.

Approach 2. Improve the systems that support children and families.

Approach 3. Build communities that put families at the center.

There is value in all of these approaches. The challenge lies in agreeing on our priorities and being willing to act on them. To do so, we need to ask these questions:

- If we can't do everything at once, where should we start?
- What actions will have the greatest impact?
- What is most doable in terms of time, resources and community commitment?
- What help can we expect from government, our schools, our elected officials, our business leaders and ourselves?

This discussion is only the beginning of a very important conversation. It is meant to spark a larger effort that engages people who care about this issue and are willing to work in their community to keep children safe and families strong.

Approach 1:

Provide support and information to parents.

Many parents do not have access to the necessary support and information to understand and deal with the challenges of child development and provide their children with the resources they need to thrive. A caring, strong parent-child relationship is an essential ingredient in child development. When parenting is at its best, children thrive.

Parenting is not an inborn skill. When most people become parents, they have little or no formal training. Good parenting requires skills and knowledge in a number of areas: child development, health, nutrition and personal finance, just to name a few. The good news is that every parent has strengths that can serve as the foundation for learning these skills. Quality parenting programs can help. These programs can include:

- Parent support groups
- In-Home Family Education – home visits by a trained parent educator
- Family Resource Centers that provide informational materials and connect families to community resources
- Financial literacy programs
- Community-based parenting seminars



Supporting new parents with community baby showers

A number of West Virginia communities have reached out to new and expectant parents through Community Baby Showers. These events provide local families with education, gifts and social connections.

Workshops held during the showers focus on parenting skills such as nutrition, breastfeeding, baby care and safety. Some communities host a “Daddy Boot Camp” especially for fathers. Parents are given educational information to take home and study. They are also provided with essential tools such as cribs, car seats, strollers and high chairs that are donated by local businesses. Parents play games and participate in discussion groups that help them meet and form bonds with other parents in the community.

Community Baby Showers engage the support of local agencies, churches and businesses in an united front supporting the families of the community. Through these experiences, families learn that they are not alone in their concerns, the community will help them and their children are welcome.

For more information about Community Baby Showers, contact Prevent Child Abuse West Virginia’s Parents in Prevention program by calling 305-523-3417.

Quality parent support programs have been proven by research to reduce child abuse and neglect. Yet, there are some concerns about this approach. Our culture places a high value on the privacy of the family and for some, programs that work with parents are seen as a violation of that privacy. Because of our cultural values, parents who need help may not access available services, for fear of being criticized or judged unworthy.

These public opinions about parenting also negatively impact funding for services. Community parenting education and support programs often operate on a shoestring budget. They do not have the resources to help every family in the community needing support.

Successful efforts to provide all parents with education and support programs and services require an environment where all parents feel comfortable and safe reaching out for help. This may require a massive cultural shift in our attitudes about parenting and the appropriate role for neighbors and communities in supporting families.

Actions that provide support and information to parents

- Churches can distribute information about child development.
- Elementary, Middle and High Schools can host regular parenting workshops.
- Develop a neighborhood family mentoring program, where families are matched with each other for mutual support and friendship.
- Advocate for funding for important parenting programs.
- Libraries and other community locations, can display parenting resources.
- Join or start a local parenting support group.
- Establish a fatherhood group, providing support and information for dads.
- Develop a community awareness campaign that promotes the family support services in your area. Make it comfortable for families to ask for these services.
- Create community places where families can have access to free or low-cost financial literacy services and information.

Approach 2: Improve the systems that support children and families

Many people feel that the problem of abuse and neglect is that government systems supporting children and families are not able to do the things necessary to keep children safe from maltreatment. Taxpayers are increasingly cynical about the ability of systems to protect children and families. Sensational news coverage about abuse and examples of children who “fall through the cracks” contribute to this sense of feeling that government systems are irreparably broken.

Actually, the systems that are already in place do a lot to help children and families. Each year, thousands of families and children are assured the basic necessities of life because of government programs. But they also have limitations that prevent access by all families who need help.

- Funding for government programs comes with “strings attached” meaning only families who meet very specific criteria are able to use them.
- There are many different kinds of programs that support children and families. They operate on their own, with no way of knowing what other programs and services are doing.



In-Home Family Education Programs: A Strategy for Supporting Parents

In-Home Family Education is a powerful, proactive strategy to reduce adverse childhood experiences. In-Home Family Educators provide voluntary parenting education and support to families with young children in their homes. They share information and support in such

areas as prenatal care, child health, early learning and literacy, and child development and behavior. They help connect families to resources in their communities and they help families stay together safely. This is done by emphasizing each family’s strengths and helping them reach their goals.

Partners in Community Outreach is a coalition of research-based In-Home Family Education programs operating in West Virginia, including Healthy Families America, Maternal Infant Health Outreach Workers (MIHOW) and Parents as Teachers. These programs currently serve families in 22 counties in addition to bordering communities in two other counties. The coalition’s goal is to create a statewide system of In-Home Family Education that reaches at least twenty percent of families who are expecting a child or have children under age three.

For more information, go to www.wvpartners.org

- Most systems have been developed to address crisis issues. There is little funding support for programs and services that do the things that protect children and strengthen families, keeping abuse and neglect from happening in the first place.
- Financial resources for programs are usually not at the level required to meet family needs.
- Without proper support, the quality and availability of services to families is often compromised.

Many states and communities are working creatively to address systemic limitations so that services are better funded and reach the families who need them. This is often done by creating collaborative councils of agencies who help families. These groups find ways to maximize resources, share administrative costs, and fill the gaps of community need. In West Virginia, county Family Resource Networks help to fill this role at the local level.

Child abuse and neglect prevention advocates strongly feel that changes in policy are necessary. They want to see new systems developed that address family strengthening, rather than family crisis. There is developing support for such efforts at the federal level and as more federal funds become available for this work, it is important that West Virginia have a plan and policies in place to support a prevention system. Without a plan or policy, important opportunities for funding could be lost.

A major concern about this approach is the time it will take to make these changes. Policy reform at the state level takes years, sometimes decades to complete. The sheer number of programs involved in developing these reforms makes the work difficult and complex. Public will for change takes time to cultivate and mature. The protection of West Virginia's children is an immediate concern, and an entire generation of our youth will be raised in the time it takes to completely put the policies and systems in place that ensure healthy development.

Actions that improve systems.

- Cultivate multiple and diverse champions to rally public support to change policies to support child abuse and neglect prevention. This can include:
 - The establishment of a state child abuse and neglect prevention policy.
 - The automation of technological systems that provide information to families.
 - The development of new government systems that promote mentoring, parent education and family-focused community development efforts.
- Organize a family strengthening coalition in your community, that includes agencies that prevent abuse and neglect, citizens and other community groups concerned about the issue. This group can focus on:
 - Assessing the community to understand where family resources are and what gaps need to be filled.
 - Developing programs that can work with systems that already exist in the community – such as a family-school partnership, or community programs that provide free adult education programs to everyone.

Approach 3:

Build communities that put families at the center.

Traditionally, community development efforts have focused exclusively on economic issues – providing jobs and the essential infrastructure that supports them. But as more economic development experts are learning, family well-being is vital to strong community development and the economic future of West Virginia. Many feel we need to change our ways of thinking and working so that communities are not only developed to ensure economic success but the success of children and families as well.

The community environment impacts both directly and indirectly a family’s ability to protect and provide for its children. Traditional efforts have focused on providing jobs to support families and this is important. But other things matter too, like the quality of education children receive, the number of safe playgrounds, the safety of neighborhoods, and access to family friendly resources, supports and activities.

Family centered community building is a new approach to ensuring that community environments protect and nurture children and families. The United Way of America defines family centered community building “as the process of engaging family residents and other stakeholders in sustained collaborative efforts to strengthen and improve conditions for families with children in an identified geographic area.”

Because no two communities are alike, these efforts look different from community to community. It is a difficult concept to grasp for community and economic developers. There is no “structure” to put in place. This is a grassroots, organic effort of citizens seeking to change conditions that affect them. It is not a program, but an ongoing mobilization around a community-defined vision of well-



Mobilizing communities to protect children

In Wyoming County, economic development and family support are seen as synonymous efforts. A local steering team has organized to address leadership and economic development issues and the well-being of families is at the center of their plans. The steering team is made

up of representatives of diverse sectors of the community including the school system, churches, city government, social service agencies and civic clubs. They work together on identified projects that range from improving transportation to organizing a county-wide informational event for child abuse and neglect awareness month.

being. This process of building community assets is self-healing – engagement in this work not only improves exterior conditions, it also improves family and community resiliency and builds important protective factors.

Family centered community building is resulting in some impressive successes across the country. But there are drawbacks to this approach. Because it is relatively new, its implementation is not an exact science. Some obstacles needed to change communities may be beyond the scope of family centered community building. Poverty and crime require large-scale social change and must be addressed on multiple fronts. A certain degree of readiness is needed by communities to begin this effort – an understanding of non-traditional leadership and common desire and vision for change are pre-requisites. These efforts also require a good deal of volunteerism, and there must be volunteer interest and a system for managing volunteers in place.

Actions that build communities.

- Schedule a meeting to talk with local community and economic development officials about the importance of including supportive family environments in economic planning.
- Invite community and economic development planning officials to work with local groups working to prevent child abuse and neglect.
- Host a community discussion group to begin conversations about a common vision for community and family well-being.
- Invite a community development expert to your community to make a presentation about the connection between family and economic success.
- Choose a small community volunteer project to show how volunteer efforts can protect children. Repair and improve lighting at a local playground. Organize a neighborhood watch. Develop a resource guide that describes community resources available to parents.

Making it Happen

Please take time to share your ideas with discussion participants and others.

- 1) What were the main ideas that came out of this discussion?

- 2) What can you personally do to help protect and nurture children and strengthen the families in your community?

- 3) What can your community do about the issue?

- 4) What policies – local, state or national – should be changed to build stronger children, families and communities?

- 5) How else can we use what we have learned today?

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