

Let's strengthen families to prevent child abuse

By Leandra Ritter

During April, Child Abuse Prevention Month reminds us that as many as one in every seven American children have experienced child abuse or neglect in the past year, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Caring adults can help strengthen families to prevent abuse and neglect.

We can start by educating ourselves. Child abuse can be neglect, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. Talk to your kids about their right to be safe, the anatomical names of their body parts, and what to do if another child or adult in their life is making them feel unsafe. Talk to your children often. Empower your children to talk to a trusted adult if they are feeling unsafe. Let that trusted adult be yourself, or someone else that you trust, such as a teacher, doctor, or policeman.

Children who are neglected or abused as well as adults who were maltreated as children are at greater risk for post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicidal thoughts and anxiety. Abused and neglected children are at greater risk of educational underachievement, poor social skills, and dropping out of high school.

An adult who experienced abuse and neglect during childhood can have an increased risk of heart disease, migraines, hypertension, and sleep disorders.

Resiliency skills can greatly reduce the negative effects that traumatic experiences can have on a person's life. RiverStone Health has made resiliency a priority for its employees through mandatory training. Resiliency means learning to take care of yourself to cope with challenges in your life. Teaching children resiliency skills while they are young can help them get through difficulties they may face now and later in life.

Children are best served when we can prevent neglect and abuse from ever starting. RiverStone Health offers services that empower parents to build stronger, safer families. Our nurses and other trained professionals visit young families in their homes through programs such as Nurse Partnership, Parents as Teachers, and Maternal Child Health.

Our KidsFirst program strives to meet the special health needs of children in the foster care system. Many of these children are also served by providers and counselors in the RiverStone Health Clinic who have been trained to meet the unique needs of these children and families.

Yellowstone Valley Children's Advocacy Center, located on the Riverstone Health campus, works with children who have been sexually abused, connecting them and their families to appropriate medical care and other community resources.

Let's not be overwhelmed by statistics on child abuse and neglect. Instead, let's focus on the small positive impacts we can make in everyday life. Our community can help prevent child abuse and neglect

by learning about it and sharing that knowledge with others. We can help children reach their full potential in life by preventing child abuse before it happens.

By Leandra Ritter is the Child Advocacy Center advocate. For more information, please contact RiverStone Family Health Services at 406-247-3360.