

Child abuse hurts our whole community

By Nichole Lund

Strong communities have strong families. Families are strong and healthy when they are free from abuse. Child Abuse Prevention Month, which is observed in April, offers opportunity to focus on ways we can work to prevent child abuse in our community.

Although reports of child abuse have decreased over the years, it's still a major concern with far-reaching impacts on entire communities. Montana Child Protective Services received 562 reports of child abuse in the month of February 2024.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events occurring during childhood – birth to 18 years old. Extensive scientific research shows increased risks of lifelong health problems for people who have these adverse experiences as children:

- Abuse: physical, emotional or sexual
- Neglect: physical or emotional
- Household dysfunction: substance use, domestic violence, incarcerated relative, mental illness, divorce, death or other separation from a caregiver

ACEs are common. More than half of all American adults have had one or more of these adverse experiences as children. People with more ACEs have higher lifetime risks of injury, cancer, diabetes, heart disease and suicide. Children of parents who experienced child abuse are three times more likely to also be abused.

The good news is that we can prevent many ACEs. Understanding risk factors for abuse is an important part of prevention. Upwards of 90% of child abuse cases in Montana are from neglect. Substance abuse and poverty strongly correlate to neglect, physical abuse and witnessing domestic violence.

Child sexual abuse occurs at all income levels, all cultural, religious and racial backgrounds. This form of abuse does not discriminate. Most victims do not tell a trusted adult until they are an adult themselves.

Communities can prevent child sexual abuse by increasing awareness of ways to prevent it from happening. These methods include making resources available so adults know facts vs. the myths on child sexual abuse. It's important to talk to your kids about safe and unsafe touches and body safety often, starting at an early age.

Community support can help stop child abuse and neglect. Services such as substance use recovery programs, access to affordable housing, livable wages and access to trauma-focused therapy help protect children from harm.

Early childhood programs can intervene before the child has experienced abuse or neglect and interrupt the multi-generational cycle of child harm. Proven prevention programs available in Billings include

Nurse-Family Partnership, Parents as Teachers, Head Start, Aware, KidsFirst, and Maternal Child Health.

Children who are abused are more likely to abuse substances, struggle in school and drop out before high school graduation. Children and adults with a history of abuse are more likely to be involved in criminal activity. They are often at higher risk for being victimized again.

In the past two years, the Yellowstone Valley Children's Advocacy Center at RiverStone Health conducted child forensic interviews for 287 child sexual abuse cases, 62 child physical abuse cases, and 37 witness-to-domestic-violence cases. The Children's Advocacy Center also connects these families to trauma-informed therapy and additional community supports to help them heal.

Effective community preventative measures are a critical investment in future generations. Prevention not only strengthens families, but it also builds a stronger and safer community. Being informed on the issues and the programs that help prevent child abuse is a great way to support prevention efforts.

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