

# Keep families healthy to reduce risk of child abuse

By Kristen Bonner

Child abuse is preventable. Caring for children can be stressful, especially when parents or caregivers lack positive parenting skills or support from family, friends or the broader community. The best strategy for protecting children is to strengthen families. Children who have parents or caregivers who have resources and education on how children grow and develop are less likely to experience abuse.

What can we do?

We can create safe, positive relationships for the children in our community. This often involves supporting the person closest to the child – the caregiver. That means checking in with parents of young children.

If you are a parent, consider choosing an early childhood home visiting program that provides support for expectant parents and those with young children. For example, Nurse-Family Partnership is like having your own nurse who visits with you every other week while you are pregnant and through the first two years of your child's life.

Another early childhood program, Parents as Teachers, provides specially trained parent coaches who visit with you twice a month until your child enters kindergarten.

RiverStone Health also can provide a nurse or trained home visitor who meets with you to address your medical and parenting concerns short term or long term.

Home visiting programs connect families to other needed services, such as WIC (Women, Infants and Children), HRDC for Best Beginnings, Office of Public Assistance for Medicaid and SNAP, housing office and healthcare. Support of families is a community endeavor. Making families strong makes a community strong.

Access to healthcare is an important way of keeping our children and families healthy. We know that health issues for children or caregivers increase the risk of child abuse.

Connecting kids to better health is the goal of Kid Connect at RiverStone Health. Clinical services include prenatal and newborn care, pediatric primary care, pediatric behavioral health with use of a SMART room and complex pediatric care. Immunizations, dental, and pharmacy services are available. Parents and caregivers also can receive healthcare through RiverStone Health.

In addition to these direct services, local leaders, employers and other community members can unite to help prevent child abuse. In Yellowstone County, Best Beginnings, Continuum of Care, Healthy By Design and Grown in Billings are coalitions working to promote strategies to help families thrive. They help provide families with access to safe, stable housing and high quality, affordable daycare, preschools and after-school care. These coalitions work to strengthen our households financially by educating our business partners on family-friendly workplaces.

Trauma experienced in childhood has consequences that last a lifetime. It's so much better to prevent abuse and neglect. If you need assistance with parenting, please call 406-247-3360. If you need medical care, please call 406-247-3350.

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