

CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION: RAISING AWARENESS, SAVING LIVES

*(Since April is **Child Abuse Prevention Month**, we asked two staff members who work with parents accused of abusing their children to explain how CHS of NJ is helping to combat this growing problem.)*

“For those of us working in protective services nationally and in New Jersey, most children in placement today were removed from their homes because of neglect,” says Pat Nardone, Director of Quality Assurance and the supervisor of our Intensive Services and Kinship programs. “We always expect to see more cases of neglect rather than serious physical abuse. **But that’s not what we’re seeing now. Serious child abuse seems to be increasing as the economy worsens.**”

According to Leah Donato, Program Administrator for both our Ocean County Family Reunification and our Intensive Services (ISP) programs, in a parent’s perspective child abuse can be confused with discipline. “In many instances, parents don’t always understand that what they are doing is considered child abuse and they do not take responsibility for it. For example, a parent may beat their child with a belt because that was the way they had been disciplined when they were a child. To them, this is what they call normal parenting. Regardless of the circumstances that brought the case to our services, our job is to identify what the abusive pattern is and to see how we can stop it and help parents, if possible, set limits and discipline but in effective and safe ways.

“One way to do this,” she says, “is by changing the nature of relationships where abuse may be involved. Mothers who are young and unmarried often refuse to believe that their boyfriend may have actually hurt their child, and they come up with excuses that do not make any sense. In the emergency room, for example, one mother told the doctor that her three-year-old daughter had been feeling sick that morning and must have gotten dizzy and fallen down. The doctor compared the girl’s injuries to that of a child without a seat belt riding in a car that crashed into a wall at 60 miles per hour. The mother’s explanation could never match the child’s injuries.”

Our ISP and Family Reunification staff usually work with each family for about year. “Child abuse is a very gray area,” states Donato. “We work on changing parenting behaviors to safe and successful behaviors. We try to help parents with an addictive behavior to stop, to say no – you cannot do that! We insist that; if they want to have their child rejoin the family they cannot hurt their child ever again.”

Staff members measure success by their ability to work with parents around a sound recommendation for the child or children involved: to go back home, to live with relatives, or to be placed for adoption. “Even if the parents do lose custody,” Nardone adds, “we consider the counseling to be successful if the child ends up safely with another caring and permanent caretaker and if the parents can understand after working with us for the year what skills they lack and why they are unable to raise their child.”

While our ISP and Family Reunification staff become involved with families only after child abuse has occurred, the prevention of abuse and neglect is an important component of many other CHS of NJ programs. “CUNA, SAFE, FACES, Infant Foster Care, Kinship, Early Head Start, Helping Caring Families, our two Family Success Parent/Child Centers – these are programs that strengthen families and can help prevent serious cases of abuse from ever developing,” Nardone points out. “They teach parents even from pregnancy about the need for good prenatal care and good decisions during pregnancy as well as about child development, and how to parent their children in good ways.”

“They also get parents out of the house and interacting with others,” Donato adds. “All of us need the support of others and to help each other. That’s very important.”

Both Donato and Nardone cited the usefulness of the “211” program in helping to combat child abuse. Available by both phone and internet (www.nj211.org), 211 is a statewide, toll free and confidential referral and resource service staffed by trained call specialists. In addition to providing information about various sources of assistance, they can make a direct contact in an emergency situation.

Donato also stressed the importance of being aware of some “red flags” that may signal child abuse. In children they may include:

- ♥ Unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, or black eyes.
- ♥ Fading bruises or other marks noticeable after a child’s absence from school.
- ♥ Noticeable shrinking at the approach of adults
- ♥ Physical or medical problems that remain untreated after being brought to the parents’ attention.

Some indications of abuse in parents may be:

- ♥ Showing noticeable lack of concern for the child.
- ♥ Denying the existence of or repeated overly critical blaming their child for problems in school or at home.
- ♥ Asking teachers to use harsh physical discipline if the child misbehaves.
- ♥ Seeing their child as entirely bad, worthless, or burdensome.
- ♥ Demanding relentlessly a level of physical or academic performance the child cannot achieve.

For more information, please visit www.preventchildabuse.nj.org.