

Issue Brief

Preventing Child Abuse in Kentucky Communities

What makes Kentucky's communities strong? Good quality places to work, safe streets, community pride, top-notch schools, excellent infrastructure, and healthy families are a few of the qualities of our Commonwealth's strongest communities. Child well-being constitutes another one of the most important factors in determining the strength of a community. Children make up a significant percent of the population, and they also represent the future. Everyone has a stake in ensuring that all children have safe, healthy places to learn, play and grow up.

Strong communities don't just happen. They have residents, leaders, volunteers, and policymakers who take an active role in working for the common good and making their local neighborhoods the best places for children and families to thrive.

Providing a safe place, free from abuse and neglect, for children contributes in a powerful way to a community's strength. People know that child abuse exists in their community, but oftentimes they are confused about how to prevent it from happening. Community residents can begin to tackle the issues by becoming informed of the problem, discussing the issue in the community, and putting supports in place to assist families that experience stressful situations. Seemingly small actions that people take to support families add up to create a community where violence and abuse do not occur.

What Does Child Abuse Look Like In Kentucky?

Child abuse comes in many forms, but regardless of the form or severity, it has potential long-term effects on children and families. Abuse affects a child's physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. It can lead to learning difficulties, lack of emotional control, depression, and aggressiveness. The Department of Community Based Services (DCBS) investigates reports of child abuse or neglect in Kentucky. State law requires all Kentuckians to report suspected abuse or neglect to the child abuse hotline (1-800-752-6200), local law enforcement, or the local DCBS office. Child abuse reports in Kentucky come from a wide variety of sources, such as people in the education, law enforcement, and medical fields, parents, and other relatives, friends, and neighbors.¹ More than 80 percent of the reports name parents as the perpetrators of the abuse or neglect.²

In Kentucky, DCBS received 65,408 reports of child abuse and neglect in state fiscal year 2005. Of those reports, 30,904 (47 percent) were investigated, meaning those reports met the criteria established by DCBS for investigating allegations of abuse or neglect. The investigations involved 41,914 children across the state.

April 2006

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Support

This KYA report is funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of Kentucky Youth Advocates and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the funder.

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Neglect

The most commonly reported type of child abuse is neglect. Neglect occurs when a caregiver refuses to provide or delays the provision of health care; does not provide for basic needs such as food, shelter or clothing; abandons the child; does not provide adequate supervision, or other basic necessities needed for development of physical, intellectual and emotional capacities. Neglectful behavior appears as a pattern, not usually a single event, and can often be detected by adults in close contact with the child, such as physicians, nurses, day care personnel, relatives and neighbors.³ In Kentucky, child protective services investigated 33,038 reports of neglect or dependency in 2004, at a rate of approximately 33 reports per 1,000 children under age 18.⁴

Emotional Abuse

Though reported less frequently than other types of child abuse, emotional abuse is one of the “most pervasive and damaging” forms, because the perpetrator harms a child’s emotional development and self-esteem.⁵ The abuse can take the form of repeated criticism, insults, teasing, ignoring, rejecting, or otherwise denying a child the environment necessary for proper emotional development. There were 607 reports of emotional abuse investigated in Kentucky in 2004.⁶

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse includes rape, fondling, inappropriate touching of a child, involving a child in pornography, and incest. Nationally 90,600 children were determined to be victims of sexual abuse in 2003, which represents 10 percent of all child abuse and neglect cases. In Kentucky in 2004, DCBS investigated 3,670 reports of sexual abuse.⁷

Physical Abuse

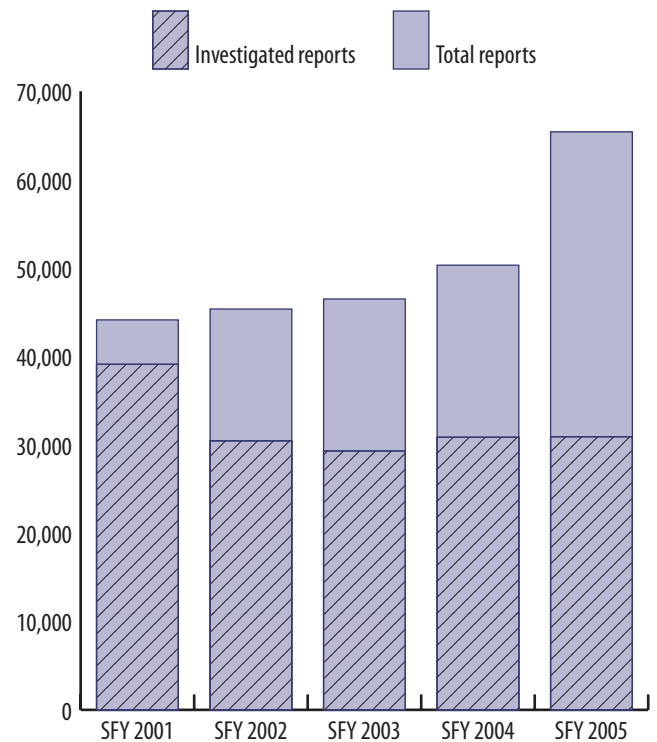
Physical abuse occurs when a caregiver acts in a manner that results, or is likely to result, in physical harm to a child. Examples include punching, stabbing, biting, kicking or shaking a child.⁸ Physical abuse can result in long-term physical impairment or even death to the child. DCBS investigated 11,374 reports of physical abuse in Kentucky in 2004.⁹

Child Abuse Trends In The Commonwealth

The number of reports of suspected child abuse has increased in recent years, while the number of

investigations dropped between SFY 2001 and SFY 2002 then leveled off (see chart below). The drop in investigated cases can be attributed, at least in part, to the adoption of a multiple response system by DCBS. Not all reports of child abuse meet the criteria for acceptance as an investigation. The multiple response system provides other levels of service, such as referrals to community resources or Family in Need of Services Assessment (FINSA).

Child Abuse Reports and Investigations in Kentucky



Source: Cabinet for Health and Family Services, Department for Community Based Services.

What Is The Impact Of Child Abuse On Children, Families And Communities?

Children who experience abuse, and the communities in which they live, bear the consequences of abuse long after it ends. Victims of child abuse often experience life-long physical and mental health issues, such as eating disorders, depression, impaired brain development, or drug use.

Families are also impacted when abuse occurs. Investigations of abuse place a heavy strain on families, especially when parents are named in the reports as

the abuser. Even when parents are not named in the report, family relationships can be stressed due to the fear, embarrassment, shame, and uncertainty about the abuse. Behavioral changes in children who have experienced abuse create another source of family stress. Child victims oftentimes react to the abuse by engaging in risky behaviors which can result in delinquency, teen pregnancy, and drug use.

These behaviors also have a clear effect on the communities at large. The life-long consequences of child abuse can include poor school achievement, abusive behavior, drug and alcohol abuse, and criminal behavior. These behaviors go beyond the child and impact the community when low educational attainment creates an ill prepared workforce, incarceration rates rise, and needs outweigh available resources.

What Can Communities Do To Prevent Child Abuse And Neglect?

Everyone has a stake in increasing parents' and families' capacity to provide a safe and healthy environment for their children. Research shows that there is a strong correlation between a lack of protective factors for children and families and the occurrence of child abuse. Key protective factors include parental resilience, nurturing and attachment, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, effective problem solving and communication skills, concrete support in times of need, social and emotional competence of children, and healthy marriages.

Communities have a great opportunity to support parents in the significant role they play as primary teachers and caregivers of their children, thereby increasing protective factors and reducing the incidence of child abuse and neglect. Community programs aimed at reducing parental stress, a significant contributing factor to abuse, and strengthening parenting skills increase the likelihood that parents will interact appropriately with their children. Programs can range from direct services that reduce financial stress to parental education opportunities (see box below).

Though a critical component of an effective prevention strategy, statewide or community-wide projects or policies are not the only ways to prevent child abuse. Individual people can do several things to reduce the incidence of child abuse in their communities.

Community-wide services and opportunities that can be mobilized for all families include:

- emergency financial assistance
- low-cost housing
- emergency food bank
- clothing bank
- low-cost medical care
- transportation
- homemakers
- parent aides
- recreation programs
- mental health assessment and treatment
- temporary foster care or respite care
- budget/credit counseling
- job training and placement
- parent support/skills training groups
- low-cost child care

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available at <http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/usermanuals/neglect/neglect.pdf>.

Reporting suspected child abuse to DCBS is everyone's responsibility and can help in getting families the help that they may need.

You do not have to be a professional to prevent child abuse. There are simple actions individuals can take to prevent abuse from occurring in the first place. Take time to meet your neighbors or offer to babysit your friend's children while they run errands. Even seemingly small acts of kindness and support can positively impact parents' interactions with their children.

Individual actions to prevent child abuse:

- Develop relationships with your neighbors
- Assist families during stressful times
- Be friendly to children in your community
- Mentor youth or volunteer at a local school
- Participate in a Neighborhood Watch program

Source: Safe Children and Healthy Families Are a Shared Responsibility. Available at <http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/index.cfm>.

The consequences of child abuse and neglect affect a broader group of people than those directly involved. The prevention of child abuse and neglect needs to mirror that breadth and include individual, family, and community-wide solutions. To truly make our communities strong and safe for our children, we cannot solely respond to abuse once it has occurred. Neither can we wait on someone else to take action to prevent child abuse. Everyone can contribute to ending child abuse and neglect. When everyone is proactive about child abuse and neglect prevention, our communities will only grow stronger.

Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children, Youth and Families. (2006) *Child Maltreatment 2004* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office).
- 2 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children, Youth and Families. (2006) *Child Maltreatment 2004* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office).
- 3 Prevent Child Abuse America. Available at: <http://www.preventchildabuse.com/neglect.htm>. Accessed April 2006.
- 4 *2005 Kentucky KIDS COUNT County Data Book*, Kentucky Youth Advocates, Louisville, KY.
- 5 American Academy of Pediatrics. Children's Health Topics: Child Abuse and Neglect. Available at <http://www.aap.org/healthtopics/childabuse.cfm>. Accessed April 2006.
- 6 *2005 Kentucky KIDS COUNT County Data Book*, Kentucky Youth Advocates, Louisville, KY.
- 7 *2005 Kentucky KIDS COUNT County Data Book*, Kentucky Youth Advocates, Louisville, KY.
- 8 English, D. (1998). "The Extent and Consequences of Child Maltreatment." *The Future of Children*, Vol. 8 No. 1.
- 9 *2005 Kentucky KIDS COUNT County Data Book*, Kentucky Youth Advocates, Louisville, KY.