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“DID YOU KNOW . . .”

That child abuse is a completely preventable crime? Yes, that is true. There is absolutely no reason for any child to suffer the physical and emotional pains of abuse. You may wonder how often it really happens or if it happens at all in your community, which is the reaction so often found in any public presentation on child abuse. So, let's look at some national statistics, courtesy of the 2007 Child Maltreatment Report, which based the report on data from all 50 states:

- The number of children who were named in a screened-in report and who received an investigation or assessment was an average of 47.2 children per 1,000, or 4.7%.
- In 2007, an estimated 3.5 million children received an investigation or assessment.
- 22.5% of those children who were subjects of a report were found to have been “maltreated,” which means abused or neglected.
- That means **787,500** children were found to be victims of child abuse or neglect.
- 75.4% of those children had no history of victimization on record.
- 31.9% of all victims were under age 4.
- 23.8% were ages 4 – 7.
- 19% were ages 8 – 11. Therefore, 75% of the victims were age 11 or under.
- The statistics based upon gender are relatively even in the defined age groups.
- 41.6% of the victims were Caucasian; 21.7% were African-American; and 20.8% were Hispanic. However, African-American, American Indian or Native Alaskan, and children of multiple races had the highest percentages of victimization per 1,000 children of like race.
- 38.7% were victimized by their mother acting alone; 17.9% were victimized by their father acting alone; and 16.8% were victimized by both parents. This means that **73.4%** of the reports **involved maltreatment by parents**. What is worse, **75.9% of the fatalities** were perpetrated by one or both parents.

I trust that you are as appalled as I am by the fact that over three quarters of a million children in the United States are victims, and that is just those we *know* about—the cases that have been reported and investigated. As a former child protective investigator, I know that many abusers threaten pretty horrible consequences if children tell, which is one of the many reasons that some individuals do not disclose maltreatment until they are adults. Therefore, I would suggest, and firmly believe, that any statistics we find, no matter how carefully prepared, still under-represent the true numbers of actual child abuse incidents in this country.

These statistics beg the question: how do we prevent child abuse? The Child Welfare Information Gateway website (2010) cites three levels of prevention: primary, secondary, and tertiary—big words for simple concepts. The first line of prevention is always the broadest and in this case, that remains true. The primary level of prevention consists of all those activities that are directed to the public at large to prevent abuse, such as public service announcements, parent education, and family support activities. Secondary prevention is more specific, providing services to high-risk families such as those with single parents, children with disabilities, teen parents, those who have substance abuse issues, etc., but it is still an attempt to prevent abuse before it

happens. The tertiary level is aimed at families who have already had some form of maltreatment. In this case, there is an effort to correct conditions so that no further abuse occurs.

What does this mean for the average family? First and foremost, if there is any possibility at all, however remote, that you could become a parent, **GET EDUCATION**. The age-old lament is that you have to have a license to operate a car but you need no training whatsoever to become a parent. If you know nothing about child development, find out! Countless infants have been abused because parents who did not understand child development believed that babies were soiling diapers in an effort to get back at the parent for some perceived action. This belief has resulted in children being beaten, burned, and other unspeakable atrocities--all because someone didn't know better and took anger out on an innocent child.

Second, create a safety plan. We all know our own limits, which includes those parts of our personalities that we may wish were different. If you are easily frustrated, quick to anger, or are generally impatient, make a plan now, before you are in a tense situation. Think of an age-appropriate place for your child if you need to give yourself a time out. I have written about this before, but it bears repeating. If you have a baby with colic or just a fussy baby, *gently* place the baby in the crib and walk away until you are calm, always making sure that there are no other risks to the child, such as an older child, animal in the room, etc. and go to another part of the house. When you are calm, then go back and deal with that fussy baby. Better to have a baby who is crying and not comforted for a few minutes than a child who is injured or dead from being shaken or beaten. If the child is a toddler, have any small space that has no hazards and is enclosed with a baby gate. Put the child in that space until you are composed. If the child is older, perhaps you can arrange for other parents to be part of your back-up plan. The children can all play at another home while you get your emotions under control. There are any number of positive options available and all are better than hurting your child.

Third, know where your child is and who your child is with. Do not hesitate to check out the other parents in your child's play group, exchange information, and refuse to allow anyone to care for your child unless you feel as assured as you can be that the adult is safe.

Fourth, part of this effort involves checking for registered sex offenders in your area. The November 2009 article (**Matt, insert link here**) addresses this topic and provides links to free sites that have essential information on registered sex offenders. Even if someone is not on those sites, **trust your gut**. If something about a person makes you feel uncomfortable, think how much worse it could be for your child, who may feel those same vibes but be afraid to speak up. Don't worry about refusing access to your child because you might be wrong about someone. I would much rather risk hurting someone's feelings but know that my child was safe than to fear offending someone and place my child at risk, wouldn't you?

Fifth, if you do feel stressed often by parenting, ask for help. I'll repeat that: *ask for help*. There is no shame in seeking help when you truly need it; in fact, it's a sign of character. It means that you recognize your stress and are mature enough to do something about it *before* it's a problem for you or your child. Some parents simply need a night out once in a while to get some relief from the challenges of parenting. For others, seeing a counselor for a while to resolve issues from your past may help. Others may find that creating a trusted group to share babysitting activities works. For those who can afford it, hiring a qualified babysitter now and then, or even utilizing day care or after school programs can be of great benefit for both parent and child. The parents get a break and the child gets increased social activity and instruction.

Finally, utilize community resources as needed. The Commonwealth has recently been blessed with a wonderful new resource, that of the Baby's Breath Crisis Nursery (see www.babysbreathhome.org). It has a license for 8 beds and can take children up to age 5 for as much as 30 nights. It can be used for a number of reasons, such as a single parent who suddenly has a medical emergency and has no one to care for the child, parents who are homeless and who need care for the children while the parents go to an adult shelter, or any one of countless other scenarios. But here is the exciting part—crisis nurseries all across the country were created to **prevent abuse!** The initial concept was to provide a place for a child to be safe while the parent addressed his or her needs. So, if you are feeling like the stress has hit an all-time high and you think you may snap, you can place your child at the Crisis Nursery so that you can get some rest and get yourself prepared to parent again. In the meantime, the child gets loving care and does not become another statistic on child abuse.

Since opening six months ago, Baby's Breath has sheltered over 50 children and **100%** of them have returned to their biological families, without any children going into foster care. This shows that it is safe to reach out for help when you need it. At this point, the only such nursery in Massachusetts is in Leicester, but hopefully, the day will come when such resources are available in every region of the Commonwealth. Prevention is so much more valuable than remediation. It ensures that children grow up without the pain of abuse and neglect, creating a healthy prospect for future generations as well. It saves money on prosecutions, therapy and prisons, and allows for emotional health and resilience for many more members of society.

Most importantly of all, it furthers the work of Jesus on this earth. During this Lenten season, we had ample opportunities to ponder the mystery of his crucifixion and death. If He loved us enough to suffer and die for us in such an excruciating manner, do you not think He would take every opportunity to reach out to a parent in distress *before* a child was harmed? Of course He would and while we are not perfect as He is, we are called to walk in His footsteps on this journey called life. This Easter season and beyond, be Jesus for a child in your life, whether that means giving yourself a time out or giving a few hours to care for the child of a stressed-out parent. Offer comfort, assistance and resources where you can. Be the light in the life of a child. You will be blessed by and for your outreach.

In Jesus' holy and powerful name, I ask special blessings on all who read this and all who impact the lives of our children. They are a precious gift and it is an honor to lead them into adulthood safely and lovingly.

May God bless and guide you now and always!

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References

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