

Preventing the Abuse and Neglect of Our Nation's Children

A. Sidney Johnson III, President & CEO Prevent Child Abuse America

Prevent Child Abuse America (PCA America) has been working to strengthen families for over 30 years. Founded in 1972 by Donna J. Stone, and previously known as the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, PCA America is the country's leading organization working at the national, state, and local levels to prevent the abuse and neglect of our nation's children.

Backed by a network of chapters in 39 states and the District of Columbia, PCA America is committed to preventing child abuse before it occurs. This organization is leading the way in building awareness, providing education, and inspiring hope in everyone involved in preventing child maltreatment. Based on our core principles of valuing children, strengthening families, and engaging communities, PCA America's work in prevention is accomplished through several vehicles.

Healthy Families America®

Healthy Families America (HFA) is PCA America's signature prevention program (www.healthyfamiliesamerica.org), created in response to research findings that most abuse and neglect occurs among children under the age of 2 and almost all fatalities due to maltreatment, among children under age 5 (U.S. DHHS, 2002; Peddle, Wang, & Reid, 2002; National Research Council, 1993). Through close partnerships with local public and private organizations, HFA provides myriad services, including parenting education, appropriate child development, health care linkages, and referrals to other community services.

In partnership with Ronald McDonald House Charities, and with ongoing support from the Freddie Mac Foundation, HFA was launched by PCA America in 1991 as a national, voluntary home visitation program for new and expectant parents, focusing on three equally important goals: to promote positive parenting, to encourage child health and development, and to prevent child abuse and neglect. Since 1992, the number of HFA program sites has grown from 25 to 459. In 2001, 50,000 families were served in 39 states, the District of Columbia, and Canada. Over the past decade, HFA has become a major focus of PCA America and a major national model program.

Of most importance, HFA has been found to benefit families. Our HFA research folder documents recent reviews of more than 15 evaluation studies of HFA programs in 12 states. These conclude that HFA programs have increased immunization rates among children, the use of prenatal care, and access to primary medical services; improved parent-child interactions and school readiness; decreased dependency on welfare; and reduced child maltreatment. (http://www.preventchildabuse.org/learn_more/research_docs/hfa_research_folder.html).

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The Chapters

We believe prevention best occurs—and must be supported—at the community level. Therefore, local chapters were established early in the organization's history to ensure that PCA America's mission was replicated at the state and community levels. The special needs of each state are met through the support, vision, and leadership of each chapter, and chapter programs are supported by the guidance and assistance of the National Office.

Although united in their shared dedication to the prevention of child abuse and neglect, each chapter is unique in the programs and services it offers. All chapters have a statewide scope, advocate on prevention issues, offer public education on prevention, and serve as an information resource. In addition, 74% sponsor Child Abuse Prevention Month activities each April, 68% hold statewide conferences, 61% operate "help-lines," 53% offer parent support programs, 42% sponsor school-based programs, and 37% provide direct service. All PCA America chapters are separate, independent 501(c)(3) organizations governed by volunteer boards and staffed by professionals in the field.

Circle of Parents™

Parenthood is one of the most important, rewarding, and challenging responsibilities any of us faces, although sometimes the demands parents experience can be overwhelming. Many commu-

nities have found that parent-to-parent support groups can help immensely.

Through a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Child Abuse and Neglect (OCAN), and with support from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), PCA America and the National Family Support Roundtable formed a national collaboration to expand and enhance family support services to include parent self-help support groups across the country. This collaborative project—Circle of Parents—offers free weekly meetings, in which parents come together to exchange insights into common parenting challenges. The Circle of Parents manages and grows a national network of these groups, develops strategies to connect groups to underserved populations, and provides a model of shared leadership and mutual assistance. Since its inception in 2000, the Circle of Parents has grown its membership to include 22 statewide and two regional organizations that encompass over 600 local groups.

Advocacy

PCA America founded, belongs to, and supports the National Child Abuse Coalition, which represents more than 30 national organizations and works at the federal level to educate public policymakers about preventing child abuse. PCA America is also a key participant in the National Call to Action, a collaboration of organizations throughout the country focused on the goal of preventing child abuse and neglect. PCA America continues to improve its access to a variety of national funding streams that support prevention efforts, including the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF). It also continues to communicate with various chapters, family support groups, and HFA sites through its web site, action alerts, legislative updates, and monthly bulletins. Since 2001, PCA America has worked with U.S. Representative Tom DeLay and other members of Congress first to obtain and then to grow annual appropriations for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to study child abuse and neglect.

Research

The National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research (National Center) was established in 1986 at PCA America to develop original research, evaluate prevention programs, enhance links among researchers and practitioners, and underscore our commitment to be a research-based organization. The National Center disseminates information about the prevention of child maltreatment across the country and provides training and consulting services to numerous organizations.

Our early work in tracking national reports of abuse and neglect annually reported to state child protective services helped lead to NCANDS, the National Child Abuse & Neglect Data System, administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which directs the nation's reporting of child maltreatment statistics. Today, in collaboration with other researchers around the country, the National Center continues to be at the forefront of the surveillance of child maltreatment, the evaluation of prevention programs, and the development of a national, participatory research agenda for child abuse and neglect prevention.

Prevention Education

One of the most important times of the year for child abuse advocates is during the nationwide observance of Child Abuse Prevention Month each April. This month-long observance is dedicated to increasing public awareness about the continuing problem of child abuse and neglect and is a time for us to focus our country's efforts and resources on the critical issue of prevention. Public awareness efforts of PCA America in communities across the nation make use of our web site (www.preventchildabuse.org), which has an average of 1,250 visitors every day, publication library of more than 70 titles, *Lookin' Up* newsletter, and annual Community Resource Packets.

For nearly 30 years, PCA America has collaborated with the Advertising Council, developing and distributing award-winning print, radio, and television ads that have helped raise awareness of abuse and neglect. Our latest campaign, which was launched in April 2002, "A Child Is Helpless—You Are Not," shows more strongly than ever that prevention is possible and underscores community responsibility.

Current Developments

PCA America has been working closely with leaders of the U.S. Catholic Church as they respond to the sexual abuse issues the Church is currently addressing. As part of this initiative, PCA America leaders recently discussed the issue of child sexual abuse and its prevention with the Church's newly created National Review Board/Safe Environments Subcommittee. Although the U.S. Catholic Church clearly needs to take corrective action steps, such as a zero tolerance policy for sexual abuse by priests, we have emphasized the great opportunity of the Church to be proactive by requiring prevention education to children, parents, priests, and volunteers as part of its policy to establish safe environments in every diocese.

Future Initiatives

We are now devoting much of our energy to more clearly strengthening and defining our national focus. This is being accomplished by creating national research and public policy agendas, as called for in our strategic plan. To these ends, we are convening meetings with experts from all areas of the child abuse and neglect prevention field to better understand what research questions remain—which ones need to be asked as well as answered. In addition, we are examining what legislative efforts we might need to gain further support for our mission, and we are increasing our commitment to developing bipartisan political backing of child abuse and neglect prevention.

Unfortunately, child abuse and neglect still exist in our communities. However, I am pleased that PCA America—with its network of community-based services, advocacy efforts, and research and prevention education—is helping to lead our nation toward prevention of the abuse and neglect of our children, the most innocent and defenseless of us all.

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