

child abuse— extension's role

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There's a war going on right here at home that we should be deeply concerned about. It's a violent battle that directly affects about one percent of all children annually.¹ It's in all communities and states—even yours!

"Human" problems are Extension's concern. The 1974 Focus II Extension Home Economics-ECOP report communicates this message. Extension's role in the fight to eliminate child abuse and neglect depends on the ability of various Extension program areas to cooperate—mainly home economics, community resource development, and 4-H.

Extension's Concern

Historically, Extension has been involved in the educational aspect of helping parents raise children. The Focus II report recognized that abuse of children is a critical problem and reaffirmed the importance of parenting as a priority program area for home economists. Focus II urged Extension to function not only as educators, but also to provide leadership in the

... areas of community decision-making and public affairs. To serve as an educator or resource person by helping people obtain objective information as a basis for the decisions they make concerning public policy and issues related to families²

The report emphasized the need for Extension to be involved in interdisciplinary community action programming. Extension has a role in public policy as well as with individual education. It's unclear, however, how Extension should carry out this program responsibility.

This article suggests a model and plan of action designed to combat child abuse and neglect, with Extension providing the community leadership.

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Community Perspective

A plan of action should include not only "how to's," but also an overall strategy. A perspective or model provides the basic structure from which to operate or improvise.

This model is based on the dimensions of *service, education, and advocacy* with an *overall coordinating structure*. Service provides help for those with the problem. Education can help prevent the problem. And advocacy asks the politically sensitive question, and provides the emotion necessary to "actionize" the program. In reality, each of these dimensions tend to function individually. Thus, a coordinating system is essential to keep community efforts on target.

Service

Legislative action in every state has encouraged communities to respond to the problem of child abuse. But how—and with what effect? Required reporting of suspected cases of abuse or neglect has overloaded the designated agencies with casework. A dramatic example was found in Florida. In 1971, after amending the basic reporting statute, installing a central registry and statewide "hotline," and initiating a protective service program, the number of suspected cases reported increased from 17 to 19,000.³

This article suggests a model and plan of action designed to combat child abuse and neglect, with Extension providing the community leadership.

Nationally, it's becoming difficult for social service agencies to provide meaningful support to identified families. Unless abusive and neglectful families are properly helped, the war will never be won. Communities must develop an effective, efficient service component. Agency and nonagency services must be coordinated to cover the total spectrum of needs of identified families. An example of such a program is the Nashville Plan—a comprehensive emergency service program.⁴

Education

Nationally, most child abuse and neglect programs are service oriented. Educationally directed programs are designed primarily to develop *community awareness of the problem—not its prevention*.

The challenge faced by Extension in developing effective programming is to: (1) accurately define the "target" population(s) and (2) develop strategies on how to reach them.

Research to find the specific target audience is inconclusive.⁵ The best method is to work with the agency in your county that investigates abuse and neglect and specifically determines the audience for the educational programs.

A survey of the educational programs aimed at preventing child abuse and neglect in Riley County, Kansas, suggested that new programs weren't needed. Instead, existing programs might be directed at specific target groups—like recently divorced parents, particularly of a younger age.

*Missing Dimension—
Advocacy*

Advocacy provides the catalyst necessary to put action into community programs. In Kansas, advocates for the prevention of child abuse and neglect have been largely responsible for intensifying the constructive efforts begun by the service and educational sectors.

Advocates helped establish an annual Governor's Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect. They have sponsored, supported, or been involved in numerous community conferences designed to: (1) increase community awareness and (2) enhance community organization and commitment.

Advocacy represents a dimension outside the traditional institutional structure that has the potential to strongly influence the community power structure and decision-making process. Advocacy is a potential that the service and education dimensions haven't effectively used to solve human problems.

**Interprogram
Cooperation**

Extension is unique in its potential to organize the total community action program needed. Within Extension, there's a combination of units whose collective expertise, support-base, and mission represents the force necessary to organize and sustain the efforts needed to eliminate the problem of child abuse.

Extension home economics is actively supporting the *community's need for good parenting*. Community resource development staff understand community leadership, structure, processes, and politics. The 4-H program is in part a parenting program. Its members and volunteer leaders are the children and parents of the community.

This combination of Extension units cooperating in a statewide program (even perhaps nationally) could provide the charge necessary to win the battle.

The "How To's"

What situations currently exist in your community, county and state? Assess the service and educational activities available. Identify the people involved. What efforts have already been tried? Here's where the Nashville Plan might provide a stimulus for alternative actions. Remember, while an efficient and effective service dimension is instrumental to this effort, alone it's inadequate to accomplish the goal.

Advocacy

Next is the development of community awareness and support. Here Extension's role may be to act as a catalyst.

Nationally, there's a foundation, the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse (NCPCA), that can provide help for your community. In 1976, the NCPCA started a demonstration chapter in Kansas to test the effectiveness of their concept—advocacy. Because of their success in Kansas, the NCPCA has decided to expand its efforts to all 50 states starting in 1978. Further information about their organization can be obtained by contacting the Chicago office.⁶

Advocacy has the most clout when organized statewide. The family life specialist in your state may play a key role in identifying individuals who could help provide state level leadership. The need for a direct tie between this leadership and Extension is critical.

After organizing at the state level, the NCPCA and Extension can identify community volunteers responsible for organizing local communities. Extension facilitates from behind the scenes.

Organize for Continuity

Community organization is essential to ensure program continuity. A coordinating council of representatives from the service, educational, advocacy, business, and governmental sectors, as well as the public-at-large, is a good idea. The council should have the responsibility and power to formulate local policy and make decisions that affect the communities and counties involved. Community resource development staff can provide invaluable leadership in this phase.

Educating for Prevention

Preventive educational programming starts at the community level and systematically develops comprehensive programs reflecting: (1) understanding of the complexity of the problem—there aren't simple answers, (2) identification of the target groups, (3) redirection and/or development of specific educational programs designed to change behavior, and (4) continual program feedback (evaluation) to enhance program quality and effectiveness.

Under the present system, in most states, private citizens are legally responsible to report suspected cases of child abuse or neglect. Child violence ranges from overt physical abuse to covert mental neglect.

The public needs education in the identification process. In Missouri, in 1976, 32% of all reported cases of suspected abuse or neglect were *unsubstantiated*.⁷ What happens to a family when society needlessly questions their ability to parent? Who protects families from *bureaucratic abuse*?

Extension has a social responsibility to continually educate the public. The public must know what constitutes *child abuse and neglect so that reports of suspected incidents reflect fact and not just good intentions.*

Conclusion

The last and perhaps the most important consideration is the realization that mandated reporting is a short-range measure for dealing with violence against children—a measure that ultimately can have negative social consequences. Mandated reporting short circuits the interpersonal relations of a community. Instead of “if you suspect—report,” how about “if your suspect—confront and support”? If that doesn’t work—then report.

The public must be sensitive to, and knowledgeable of, what constitutes child abuse and neglect, the scope of the problem, and what resources and support systems are necessary. With this understanding and commitment, communities may eliminate one of the worst social tragedies possible—the abuse and neglect of our children.

To paraphrase Bronfenbrenner’s address to 4-H agents at the 1976 National 4-H conference: “Who cares for those who care for children?” Our society must provide support for parents to help them adequately fulfill this commitment.

I believe that nationally Extension can play a significant and instrumental role in this effort. Let’s do it now!

Footnotes

1. R. E. Helfer, *Proceedings of Governor’s Conference for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect*, D. R. Imig, ed. (Manhattan: Kansas State University, 1978).
2. *Focus II Extension Home Economics*, Vol. B2616, Home Economics Subcommittee of ECOP, 1974.
3. *Child Abuse and Neglect: The Problem and Its Management*, “Vol. 1—An Overview of the Problem,” DHEW Publication No. (OHD) 75-30073 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975).
4. National Center for Comprehensive Emergency Services to Children, Nashville Urban Observatory, 320 Metro Howard Office Building, 25 Middleton Street, Nashville, Tennessee 37210.
5. R. D. Parke and C. W. Collmer, “Child Abuse: An Interdisciplinary Analysis,” in *Review of Child Development Research*, E. M. Hetherington ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975).
6. National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse, Suite 510, 111 East Wacker Drive, Chicago, Illinois 60601.
7. John A. Dvorak, “Pressure, Anguish Fill Abuse Cases,” *The Kansas City Times*, December 29, 1976, p. 1C.