

Relief Nursery shows child abuse can be prevented

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April is child abuse prevention month, which usually prompts an op-ed that is filled with daunting statistics like “a child in Oregon dies before his or her first birthday every day,” and “a child in Oregon is abused or neglected every 57 minutes.” According to the Children’s Defense Fund, these are facts. But today we have good news to share. We want to tell a story of hope. It is a story born from our community, which banded together 30 years ago to help children and families rewrite their futures, free of fear and full of promise.

In 1976, child abuse and neglect was a problem in our community. Worse yet, children and families at risk of abuse and neglect didn’t have many services available to them until after a child had been victimized. The primary response to abuse and neglect was removing children from their families and putting them into foster care.

That didn’t seem like an enlightened approach to many people. Why not offer preventive services? Why not support children and families so that the abuse and neglect didn’t happen in the first place? A group of community leaders took a stand and said, “We can do better for our children.” Peggy Hoyt and the women of the Junior League of Eugene joined with Lynn Frohmayer and Mary Ellen Eiler of Child Protective Services, and they created the Relief Nursery, a private nonprofit agency dedicated to supporting families and keeping children safe.

At first, a handful of children were in the program, which met in borrowed space in churches. Word spread, more families came and the Relief Nursery grew. Our community gathered around its vulnerable citizens and said, “We will not let our fragile families get hurt.”

As our community’s needs grew, so did the Relief Nursery. In 1993, our community came together again under the leadership of John Sheppard. He successfully chaired a capital campaign for a Relief Nursery building. A campaign that captured the essence of what the Relief Nursery is still about: a group of dedicated community volunteers who realize that our community’s health depends upon the health of our children and their families.

Under the guidance of Jean Phelps, executive director for 22 years, the Relief Nursery grew from a small respite program to a comprehensive child abuse prevention program recognized in 2003 as innovative by the United States Office of Child Abuse and Neglect.

Today, the Relief Nursery serves more than 1,000 children and their families every year. We’ve had great success – more than 93 percent of the children served have no reports of abuse or neglect after involvement with the Relief Nursery. That’s success, considering that when we first meet the families almost half are involved with child protective services. Eight other Oregon communities have opened their own Relief Nurseries.

Still, there is work to do. According to the annual Children First for Oregon report, 11 of every 1,000 children are victims of child abuse and neglect and 53 percent of the victims are under the age of 6. Common sense tells us that child abuse and neglect is one of the worst things that can happen to a child. And research shows us that the physical and emotional abuse of children yields harmful

consequences for society. A growing body of evidence links child abuse and neglect with drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, youth violence and chronic health problems. But, research can't tell us what is the right thing to do.

The solution, we have learned, begins with intervention. A little support now can prevent a lot of bad things from happening later and no contribution to this effort is too small. Children need your help and here are some things you can do: volunteer time, donate money, contribute goods or services, don't look away from family members or friends that have problems, reach out to those who are isolated and remember, today's children are our future.

As April, Child Abuse Prevention month, comes to a close we remind you that keeping children safe is a year-round effort. Too many children are hurt every day by adults and too many lives are being affected by abuse and neglect. Hope lives in the hearts of our children, and we have to reason hope that our community will continue to come together to prevent child abuse and neglect.

Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of The Children's Defense Fund said it right: "If we don't stand up for children, then we don't stand for much."