

Don't Miss Opportunities to protect children

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National Child Abuse Prevention Month came and went in April. During that month, civic leaders and businesses came together on behalf of children. The challenge now is to sustain the focus on the damage done by child abuse, and on the many effective ways to prevent it.

We saw examples of both in April. Mayor Sid Leiken of Springfield and Mayor Kitty Piercy of Eugene proclaimed April to be Child Abuse Prevention Month in their cities, calling on citizens to support families, thereby preventing child abuse and strengthening the community.

Levi Strauss & Co. sponsored a Blue Ribbon Workplace Awareness Campaign in which 14 local businesses participated. The blue ribbon has been the national symbol of child abuse awareness since the spring of 1989, when a Virginia grandmother began the campaign as a tribute to her 3-year-old grandson, who died at the hands of his mother's abusive boyfriend. The campaign was a memorial to children who have suffered abuse and neglect, and a reminder to us all that we must do whatever we can to protect our children.

For any awareness effort to be effective, it must be followed by a willingness to act.

What we do know is that in April one individual did act - a young woman saw a severely injured baby and contacted authorities. Springfield police immediately responded, and because of these actions, a child is alive today.

According to the Children First for Oregon's 2006 County Data Book, 824 children in Lane County were victims of abuse and neglect. Of those children, 55 percent were under the age of six.

The highest percentage of child abuse victims are under the age of 3. Studies consistently find that the first three years of life are critical to emotional and intellectual development. During these early years, 75 percent of brain growth is completed.

A focus on child abuse prevention must not be confined to one month a year. Rather, it is a 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year responsibility. We must all do our part, whether it's volunteering our time, donating money or calling authorities to protect a child. We must never turn our back on the children and we should extend a hand of help to the parents.

Most parents recognize that they can be better parents. Many do not have family support. Others are unemployed or underemployed. Still others are struggling with mental health or substance abuse. Often these parents just need to be given the tools and the support that will help them be the parents they want to be, but have never been given the chance to be.

Children are mistreated when people find themselves in stressful situations, without community resources, and don't know how to cope. The Relief Nursery has had much success providing a safe haven for children and a place where parents can be treated with respect and taught the skills they need to care for their children and themselves.

The young woman who took action to protect an 18-month-old baby put herself in potential danger by calling authorities. Still, she put the well-being of the child first. Her actions made a difference. By supporting agencies such as Relief Nursery, purchasing Rotary Duck Race tickets and wearing a blue ribbon to remind those around you of the importance of child abuse prevention, your actions are making a difference, too.

Let us take our April awareness and move forward, never missing an opportunity or avoiding our responsibility to protect children from abuse and neglect.