


Local

# Area programs help prevent child abuse

 By Stephanie Salmons Messenger-Inquirer

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For Kristy Clark, preventing child abuse is a collaborative effort.

Clark is program coordinator of the Green River Area Development District's Community Collaboration for Children, a federally funded program that aims to prevent child abuse and neglect, support and strengthen families and encourage communities to work together.

Additionally, the CCC also contracts with the Green River District Health Department's Building Stronger Families to provide in-home child abuse prevention services.

The CCC, though, is really a regional network of "community partners that come together," to provide networking, funding and training opportunities in the community, Clark said.

"We really just want to come together for community involvement to provide things in the community to help prevent child abuse."

The network has between 25 and 30 members from both private and public sectors.

It works well because it's much more costly for agencies to work alone, said Building Stronger Families program coordinator Linda Wahl.

"By bringing all these people together and different agencies all throughout our region, because we're a seven-county region, it brings in more people," said Wahl.

Clark said it's good to have partners throughout the region.

"We cover seven counties and obviously I can't be in seven counties at one time, so it's good to have partners in those counties and have the voice out there ... that are part of our network that can talk about the CCC," she said.

They also stress parental involvement and talk to other parents about available programs and what they've learned in training to help other families prevent child abuse, said Clark.

It's a "domino effect, really," she said.

The CCC also gets funding for mini-grants, which can often benefit the agencies within the network, Clark said.

## **BUILDING STRONGER FAMILIES**

According to Wahl, Building Stronger Families got its start nearly two decades ago in 1997 because "children were dying at the hands of their caregivers."

"We wanted to find a positive way to impact families and prevent abuse and neglect," she said. "What we've found out is that parents want to be the best they can be, but just don't always know (how)."

BSF, she said, provides the resources, skills and knowledge to get there. It's for families with children from birth to age 18.

When families are referred to the voluntary program, Wahl said BSF staff goes into the home and discusses what they do. Once a family is enrolled in the program, they work toward goals.

"What we've found is especially with that first child, everything is new, everything you go through," said Wahl. "Potty training is new, so we bring out a lot of information on how to do it. We're really into positive discipline. Parents need to spend a lot of quality time with their child, which means sitting on the floor crawling at the child's pace, let the child set the pace. If the child wants to play with blocks for 15 minutes, that's fine. You don't have to have an agenda, you don't have to have flash cards. They learn by playing with a caregiver. So if you're giving lots of love and lots of attention, as much as you can, and also setting limits and boundaries for that child so that child can learn what is expected of them and what is misbehavior, and they learn to stay within those boundaries."

Wahl said parents are taught about routines. When a child learns to expect a routine, parents can see "great behavior" from that alone.

"Just by changing that one thing, the child feels very secure, and they know what to expect," she said. "They know I'm going to take a nap at this time, I'm going to eat at this time, I'm going to play at this time. Things just work much better ... in a house with a lot of routine, especially with little kids. As they get older, it can be a lot more diverse, but when they're young, they like that daily expectation."

Communication skills are also incorporated into the curriculum, Wahl said. That's a skill parents can use not only with their children, but their significant others and co-workers as well. BSF also teaches problem-solving and decision-making skills and links families to resources in the community.

"It's amazing how many resources different counties have and families don't always know those resources are available," she said.

## **Helping HANDS**

The GRDHD's HANDS program works with expectant parents or new parents with a child up to 12 weeks old.

Program manager Candi Kamuf, a registered nurse, said HANDS, which is available in every county statewide, stands for Healthy Access Nurturing Development Services and is one of the largest home visitation programs in Kentucky.

The program aims to make babies "the wisest and smartest they can be" by teaching parents how to do developmental activities so the child's brain can be stimulated, she said.

"Our goal is building healthy and safe environments for the optimal growth and development of children," said Kamuf.

And when looking at child abuse prevention, Kamuf said the program helps parents bond and build attachments.

"It's a support person coming into your home, giving support," she said. And if needed, HANDS can refer families to other organizations that can provide help.

## **Prevention**

April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month.

Clark said in-home programs, such as Building Stronger Families, gives parents the knowledge, resources and tools they need so stress levels are reduced and "they feel like they have more of a support system. It's vital to child abuse prevention."

"If I, as a parent, am very attached to my child, and my child is very attached to me ... we have a great attachment, then I am less likely to harm my child. If I am an empathetic parent and I understand what the child is feeling and why they're doing what they're doing, I am less likely to harm my child," Wahl said.

Education is key, said Clark.

"If you can let people know in the community, whether it's the parents we have involved or the agencies we have involved, let them know what resources are out there, let them know what trainings are being held, let them know even who works where so that they know a point-of-contact person. Those things are crucial to moving forward if you're trying to help someone or know someone in need," she said. "The more that we communicate and the more that we network and the more that we educate each other, the stronger we are in being able to help those that we serve."

Prevention, said Wahl, is always less expensive than fixing a problem.

"When you think about child abuse and neglect, it has such ramifications on your psyche, on your physical health, on your emotions, on your ability to relate with people. They have done studies that children who are ... socially and emotionally typical do better at making friends, they do better

at school, they drop out less, they're more successful in jobs. So what we want is those kids to become productive, happy citizens that can replace all of us at our jobs some day."

Wahl said the mission of Building Stronger Families is that children live in happy, healthy safe and nurturing homes

"Wouldn't that be wonderful if all our children lived in that. What it would change in our community and what expenses it would cut off as they age, it would save money ... if they want to save money, put it in prevention."

For more information about CCC, contact Clark at 270-926-4433, and for more information about Building Stronger Families, call Wahl at 270-852-2932, and for additional information about HANDS, call Kamuf at 270-852-2925.

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Alan Warren

Photo by Alan Warren, Messenger-Inquirer/awarren@messenger-inquirer.com.

Linda Wahl, left, program coordinator of Green River District Health Department, talks about trying to prevent child abuse and neglect along with Kristy Clark, lead case manager of GRADD (Green River Area Development District, right, at GRADD in Owensboro.



Alan Warren

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Kristy Clark, lead case manager of GRADD (Green River Area Development District, at GRADD in Owensboro.