



**Prevent Child Abuse
Indiana**

A Division of The Villages

Tips for Talking with the Media

- **Spell out your preventive solutions at the top of the communication.** The public often believes the only solutions to child abuse lie within the legal system. To make a case for prevention – a vague word on its own:
 - ✓ describe actual prevention activities that engage your community
 - ✓ explain why the prevention activities are needed and are successful
 - ✓ connect the dots for people so that prevention programs make sense to them
 - ✓ avoid implying that fixing “bad” parents is the end-all solution
 - ✓ bring in additional community players and use non traditional “messengers” as advocates for prevention
- **Avoid vivid, dramatic details and the focus on the worst cases** as these only serve to reinforce people’s current understanding of abuse as specifically a criminal issue. When exposed primarily to dramatic cases (which the media favor), people tend to conclude that abuse is inevitable because it involves bad people who are bad parents. The solution that makes sense to them, then, is to remove children from danger and punish those responsible.
- **Wherever possible, tell stories of efficacy**
 - ✓ demonstrate how programs and policies have worked for the benefit of children by predicting and addressing abusive situations before they happened
 - ✓ increase examples of situations, not people or episodesFor a list of approaches and success stories, see the Child Welfare Information Gateway’s page at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/programs/>
- **Forget the numbers for explaining the prevalence of abuse**

People believe it is a big problem and they tend to overstate it numerically (as they do many social problems they deem important). Correcting their error is only likely to result in diminished concern for the problem. Therefore, it is not a good idea to pair prevention activities and announcements with the release of your state’s annual child abuse statistics. Also remember that if you give these numbers to the media, the story will almost certainly lead with them and a focus on the problem which takes the emphasis away from prevention .
- **Stop fighting the fight we have won** by continuing to convince people of the prevalence and seriousness of child abuse. It is time to shift to deepening citizens’ understanding of the problem and its solutions. We believe child abuse prevention is not receiving adequate public support not because people aren’t outraged by the issue, but because they stop at outrage and lack credible solutions beyond reporting episodes of abuse.

- **Try to get multiple actors into the picture** and broaden the discussion to the larger community
- **Avoid communications that imply that abuse is only a family issue to be solved by governmental agencies who “save” or “punish.” Emphasize community responsibility and resources available for assisting parents and caregivers.**

General Tips for Working with the Media

- **There is no such thing as “off the record” and you need to be comfortable with taking the risk that anything and everything you say may be printed or aired.**
- **Be sure that those identified as “contacts” for the media:**
 - ✓ are easily accessible
 - ✓ are informed and knowledgeable of the topics/issues
 - ✓ will respond promptly to media calls and requests
 - ✓ understand that they are spokespersons for the organization and should not express their personal opinions or agendas
 - ✓ will present a professional image
 - ✓ know that it is okay to say, “I do not know but I will find out for you or you could contact _____ who should be able to answer that for you.”
- **Stay on message.**
 - ✓ Narrow your message to one or two central points that you want to get across and stick to them.
 - ✓ You do not have to explicitly answer every question a reporter poses.
 - ✓ Answer every question in such a way that it reflects your key message.
 - ✓ Do not repeat something a reporter says that is not part of your point, even to disagree with it. For instance, by saying “child abuse is not just dramatic cases of parents killing their children,” you remind your audience of parents killing children.
- **Emphasize that prevention is about solutions to child abuse.**
 - ✓ Do not leave the word “prevention” unexplained.
 - ✓ Describe or suggest solutions.
 - ✓ Keep in mind that reporters will usually try to move you back to drama and tragedy.
 - ✓ Stress that child abuse is a problem with solutions that do not receive the attention they should.
 - ✓ Explain that the public cares deeply about child abuse but does not know what can be done about it.
- **Reporters will want data and statistics.** Instead of supplying them with the traditional child abuse statistics on reports, substantiations and deaths, give them stats on efficacy. Provide examples of what prevention strategies are working in your community:
 - ✓ mentoring

- ✓ after school programs
- ✓ parenting support groups
- ✓ parenting skills classes
- ✓ voluntary home visiting

Provide them with:

- ✓ Numbers of people reached with these services
- ✓ Impact of such services

General Media Tips, continued

- **Letters to the editor are a great way to reach a general audience.**
 - ✓ Keep them short.
 - ✓ Be focused on one or two points.
 - ✓ Include a call to action whether it is to support specific legislation, display blue ribbons, or to learn more about a prevention program or service.
 - ✓ Develop an articulate group of volunteers who can write letters so that the letters do not always come from one source.
- **Become “experts” on the media in your community:**
 - ✓ Know their deadlines for going to print or being aired
 - ✓ Arrange your activities to coincide with their deadlines
 - ✓ Know what kinds of stories or features they generally cover
 - ✓ Get contact information for specific reporters or contacts and send your releases and advisories to the most appropriate person, not a general position
 - ✓ Talk to them to learn how they like to receive information – email, hard copy, phone call
 - ✓ Find out what they consider “newsworthy”
 - ✓ Convene an annual Media Advisory Board to get their input and feedback on how your Council could improve its media relations
- **Avoid using abbreviations, contractions, and the “alphabet soup” in your printed and verbal communications.**
- **Be sure that you collaborate with other social and human service entities in your community so that you are aware of the resources they offer and can refer media to the appropriate contacts at their agencies or organizations.**
- **Try to maintain consistency of the contact person(s) over a two to three year period so that positive relationships can be established.**
- **Include reference to your Council’s affiliation with Prevent Child Abuse Indiana as a way to enhance the breadth and credibility of your resources and information.**
- **When possible, give them “leads” or story ideas that have no direct relationship to your Council. This will help to build their trust and confidence in your Council as a “connected leader” within the community.**

Samples of Specific Media Opportunities/Tools

- **Sample Language for Letter to the Editor for April**

Based on the guidelines above, here is some general language about Child Abuse Prevention Month that could be adapted for press releases announcing events, letters to the editor, or website announcements.

The month of April is devoted to celebrating everything we can do to transform our community into a place that cares about – and actively supports -- families and children. By ensuring that all parents in our community have access to quality childcare, affordable health services, parenting education resources, and substance abuse and mental health programs, we make progress toward what the month stands for: April is Indiana Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Awareness Month.

The majority of child abuse cases stem from situations and conditions that are entirely preventable in an engaged and supportive community. A community that cares about early childhood development, parent support and maternal mental health, for instance, is more likely to see families nurturing children who are born healthy and prepared to enter school ready to learn. Cities and towns that work to create effective school systems and who come together to ensure that affordable housing is available in safe neighborhoods are less likely to see stressed, isolated families who do not know where to turn.

Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Awareness Month is about connecting all of these dots so that the solutions to child abuse receive the attention the public craves. In a recent poll, 89% of Americans reported that child abuse was a “very important” moral issue to them¹. But it is not enough to care about the problem and address its consequences. We have to pay attention to the kinds of efforts that will prevent it from happening in the first place. So this April, learn more about what you and your community can do to support families and parent, thereby preventing child abuse. It is a shared responsibility and we are stronger together.

Find out more about child abuse prevention in your community [add contact information here].

- **Sample Interview Answers Regarding Dramatic Fatality or Case of Abuse**

The following are actual questions posed by a CNN interviewer following a dramatic child abuse case. The suggested answers are based on the guidelines above.

Background: “The gruesome killing of a six-year-old girl grabbed headlines earlier this week. She was found dead in a hotel room strangled, stabbed and beaten. Police say the child was brutalized and have charged her parents with murder. This case is raising questions about the frequency of child abuse.”

¹ Scripps Survey Research Center at Ohio University, February 2005

Q: First of all, this case is not an isolated incident. Abuse of children is happening by the thousands in this country every year, isn't it?

A: We are certainly losing too many children to conditions and situations that are entirely preventable. Child maltreatment happens when people find themselves in stressful situations and don't know how to cope. There are plenty of sensible ways to prevent that from happening. We know much about the kind of support that families need, and how to create the kinds of communities that really value kids. One example of a program that is successful at this is Healthy Families Indiana, a community-based program that offers all kinds of useful information to new parents. This kind of program bolsters parents' confidence, reduces stress and isolation, and – importantly – sends the message to parents that information and support is available.

Q: You know, as a parent, it is hard to fathom why a parent or caretaker would hurt a child. Help us get some understanding of what brings them to this point.

A: We know what causes child maltreatment, and many of those causes are linked to the changing nature of our communities – increased economic stress and isolation combined with fewer resources to support families, particularly those that face special hardships or challenges that are common for many of us. Conditions such as the addition of new children to the family, job loss, divorce, poverty, and substance addictions – and the stress and isolation that accompany these – can also be breeding grounds for maltreatment, increasing the risks. Communities can make sure that parents have access to the services that reduce risk factors for abuse – such as programs that work to strengthen families and increase parents' knowledge and confidence about parenting and child development. We can – and should – provide families with adequate, accessible and affordable resources such as child care and parent education. By keeping focused on anything that leads to stable families and healthy child development, we help to reduce the likelihood that child abuse ever occurs in the first place.

Q: You know, having been personally involved with this cause, I know that this is a sort of vicious cycle -- people who have been abused often become violent people or criminals.

A: It is certainly true that children's early years are extremely important in terms of their development, and that getting them off to a good start lessens the likelihood that they will have problems later on. We know, for example, that adverse childhood experiences can be responsible for not only an increased likelihood of criminal behavior, but also poorer performance and negative behaviors in school, increased substance abuse, health problems such as heart disease and obesity, and increased likelihood of risky behavior such as smoking. We can get ahead of all of these negative outcomes by making sure each child has a healthy, safe and nurturing environment. The way to do that is to support their families and engage all sectors of the community.

Q: Well, I know that Healthy Families Indiana and other home-based parenting support programs are helping to stop the cycle. So, help us to understand the facts.

A: Healthy Families Indiana and other home visiting programs such as Parents As Teachers work with new parents in their homes to increase their confidence in parenting. It is a community-based

approach that works with other services across a region so that parents know what is available to them. This kind of support can be helpful to all parents, but particularly those that might be feeling isolated or unprepared. It is a great way for them to become engaged in their communities early on and to help create healthy environments for their children.

Q: I know you do not go in and target people that necessarily have the potential to abuse, but what are some of the risk factors? I mean, this is something that spans over all socio-economic groups.

A: Raising children is tough even under ideal circumstances and fewer families today have the luxury of living in ideal circumstances. Whenever and wherever you combine increasing stress on the family with a lack of community resources to support families and parents, you are creating a situation in which child abuse and neglect are more likely to occur. We need to build communities that really value children and strengthen all families in the important job of raising their kids, and provide all families with access to early childhood programs, reliable childcare, and accessible parent education and support services. We also need to offer programs and services to address the more extreme problems that families face – such as loss of income, substance abuse, special needs children, or mental health issues.

- **How to Provide Examples of Effective Prevention Strategies**

When relating stories of successful prevention strategies, it is important to connect the dots from the program to the prevention of child abuse. Given the public’s overwhelming tendency to think about child abuse in its worst forms, the term “child abuse prevention” holds little meaning to them outside of reporting. Thus, describing a parent support program as an example of child abuse prevention will not make sense to them without some explanation. The Children’s Bureau connected these dots well in its *2005 Child Abuse Prevention Month Packet*. The following is adapted from it:

- Community leaders are increasingly thinking about the personal, family, and environmental matters that strengthen families and reduce the risk of abuse and neglect. Research shows that while some things have harmful effects on children and families, others can alleviate those effects and provide benefits to parents and children.
- Successful family support activities and child abuse prevention programs are designed to promote these protective factors, which include:
 - ✓ Parental confidence and knowledge
 - ✓ Strong bonds between parents and children
 - ✓ Family social connections - to decrease isolation
 - ✓ Family knowledge of child development
 - ✓ Effective problem solving and communication skills
 - ✓ Concrete support in times of need

Research has found that the following are effective strategies that family support and child abuse prevention programs can use to bolster these protective factors:

- **Facilitate friendships and support.** Offer opportunities for parents in the neighborhood to get to know each other, develop support systems, and take leadership roles. Strategies may include sports teams, potlucks, classes, advisory groups, board leadership and volunteer opportunities.
- **Strengthen parenting.** Develop ways for parents to get support on parenting issues when they need it. Possibilities include classes, support groups, home visits, tip sheets in pediatricians' offices, and resource libraries.
- **Respond to family crises.** Offer extra support to families when they need it, as in times of illness, job loss, housing problems and other stressors.
- **Link families to services and opportunities.** Provide referrals for job training, education, health care, mental health, and other essential services in the community.
- **Support children's social and emotional development.** Some programs specifically focus on helping children articulate their feelings and get along with others. When children bring home what they learn in the classroom, parents benefit as well.

*Adapted from Building on Strengths: Enhancing Protective Factors for Children and Families,
National Clearinghouse of Child Abuse and Neglect Information.*