

When we invest in healthy child development, we are investing in community and economic development. Unfortunately, children are sometimes exposed to extreme and sustained stress like child abuse and neglect, which can undermine a child's development.

Prevent Child Abuse America focuses on public policies that prioritize prevention from the start to make sure child abuse and neglect never occur. Child sexual abuse occurs in all populations. It happens to children in all socioeconomic and educational levels, across all racial and cultural groups, and in rural, suburban, and urban areas. Long term consequences associated with child sexual abuse such as the increased likelihood of teenage pregnancy, homelessness, and drug and alcohol abuse can create a cycle of hopelessness and despair. The emotional and behavioral issues victims must face, in addition to the costs society must pay, call for increased attention to the prevention of child sexual abuse.

**Prevent Child Abuse America advocates for:**<sup>1</sup>

- 1. Raising awareness of the unacceptability of sexual abuse, and promoting the notion that stopping child sexual abuse is everyone's responsibility.**  
A comprehensive prevention strategy should include increasing parents' and other caregivers' awareness and knowledge of protective measures they can take on behalf of their children. A powerful public education message must be transmitted to the general public, encouraging society to recognize that child sexual abuse is both everyone's problem and responsibility and declaring what constitutes an appropriate adult-child relationship.
- 2. Educating the public and policymakers about the true nature of sexual abuse.**  
The wide dissemination of accurate information to the public, especially to policymakers, will help break the silence and taboo that surrounds child sexual abuse, and may facilitate the formulation of effective solutions to the problem.
- 3. Rigorously evaluating and strengthening existing sexual abuse prevention programs.**  
Research yields little evidence that current programs are preventing the occurrence of child sexual abuse. The lack of conclusive outcomes does not mean that such programs are ineffective. Rather, demonstrating effectiveness is a challenging task, mainly because of methodological shortcomings of existing evaluations. Future evaluations must correct such shortcomings. Moreover, child sexual abuse prevention programs must be strengthened so that program strategies are more explicitly directed toward the goal of preventing child sexual abuse.
- 4. Shifting the prevention of sexual abuse from children to adults.**  
Although children can retain knowledge about child sexual abuse, they often are not capable of protecting themselves from it. Adults must exercise an affirmative obligation to safeguard them. Shifting the prevention from children to adults includes: 1) extensive public education that teach adults actions they can take to protect children; and 2) training and education for parents and caregivers on how to detect sexual abuse and what to do if a child discloses sexual abuse.
- 5. Exploring, evaluating, and strengthening new approaches to prevent sexual abuse.**  
New, cutting edge approaches are being developed to prevent child sexual abuse. Examples of these approaches, such as fostering survivor leadership and circles of accountability and support, should be further explored, rigorously evaluated, and strengthened.
- 6. Making mental health services available to all those affected by child sexual abuse.**  
Mental health services can help ease some of the severe consequences of child sexual abuse and can help stop the intergenerational transmission of child sexual abuse. Moreover, mental health services available to perpetrators may help identify triggers that often lead to the abuse, helping to end such abuse.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see Prevent Child Abuse America's Position Statement *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse*, available online at: [http://www.preventchildabuse.org/advocacy/position\\_statements.shtml](http://www.preventchildabuse.org/advocacy/position_statements.shtml).

