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New Year Abuse Cases Challenge Jersey's Commitment to Children

Dear Editor,

New Jersey citizens rang in the New Year with headlines that shocked us with stories of child abuse. On New Year's Day, we read of a woman accused of hitting a 10-week-old child in the head with a cell phone as she argued with her husband. Just over a week later, a 3-year-old was hospitalized in critical condition after the toddler suffered internal bleeding, lacerations to his liver and stomach and bruising to his forehead, arms and trunk.

I am haunted by these reports. It is difficult to imagine the amount of rage and incoherence one would have to feel to strike a newborn child or toddler. However, New Jersey's children have long been vulnerable victims to intentional harm. In 2007, the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services substantiated 9,900 child abuse and neglect incidents. Twenty-three children died as a result of abuse or neglect in 2006.

While there is never an excuse for hurting a child, the causes of abuse and neglect are known, varied and often preventable. Mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and a parent's own childhood experience can lead to abusive behaviors. However, there are also far more common life circumstances that can exponentially increase the risk of abuse. Isolation, teen pregnancy, inexperience with children, low self-esteem, joblessness, lack of education, poverty, homelessness, insufficient access to healthcare, an unexpected or difficult pregnancy, and post-partum depression are some of the stressors that may contribute to abuse and neglect. As the presence of these factors increases, so does the substantial risk for abuse. The prevalence of family conflict and domestic abuse always rises during the holiday season. And, the incidence of these factors is increasing among New Jersey's families as a direct result of the recent downturn in the economy.

While we may never know whether the heartbreaks reported in New Jersey's papers could have been avoided, we can all make a New Year's resolution to support families and reduce some of the burdens that lead to abuse and neglect. For example,

- Introduce yourself to a family who may be new to your neighborhood and make them feel welcome. Families feel safer and less stressed when they know support is nearby.
- Check-in with a new parent a few weeks after the birth of their new baby arrives. Families often go from receiving a lot of support when a baby is born only to be left on their own months later. Ask how they are doing, offer to run an errand or baby-sit long enough for them to take a shower or do laundry.
- If you see a parent and young child in conflict, smile and say something nice to either of them. Your interruption may just offer the time or space they need to "de-escalate."
- Publically congratulate a parent for doing a good job – praising a parent can raise their self-esteem, reinforce their positive skills, and make them feel good about their commitment to family.
- And, as always, if you suspect child abuse or neglect, call 1-800-792-8610 or 911 immediately.

There are many parenting services available to families through Prevent Child Abuse New Jersey's home visitation, parent involvement, parenting education workshops and teen parenting programs. Education and training for professionals is also available. Our prevention programs help reduce risk factors and build resiliency in families to prevent abuse from ever occurring. Learn more about how you can help by visiting www.preventchildabuseNJ.org or calling 1-800-CHILDREN.

It's your turn to make a difference – what will you do in the New Year to help prevent child abuse?

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