

CHAPTER 6

Social Norms and Policies that Promote Effective Parenting and Community Responsibility for Child Well-Being

Effective child maltreatment prevention efforts must focus not just on individual parent-child relationships, but also on the larger social environment in which children are raised. One of the greatest challenges in advancing child maltreatment prevention efforts in North Carolina is to identify ways to change community attitudes, social norms, and policies to more effectively support parenting and the healthy development of all children. The Task Force on Child Abuse Prevention identified distinct but interrelated strategies to accomplish this: child abuse prevention public awareness campaigns focused on individual and community support of positive parenting; and increased statewide support and coordination of grassroots, comprehensive violence prevention efforts.

Strategy 1 - Child Abuse Prevention Public Awareness Campaigns

Child abuse prevention public awareness campaigns, including public service announcements, information kits, television shows, news stories, special events, and other educational and outreach campaigns, can play a key role in changing public attitudes and social norms. Typically, public awareness campaigns are used to educate the public about the issue, create momentum to change public policy, and influence individual attitudes and group behaviors. Public awareness activities have long played an important role in raising the awareness of child abuse and neglect, however, recent research on public opinion and media coverage of child abuse and neglect demonstrate that these campaigns have limited influence on family and community behaviors and in changing public policies to better promote child maltreatment prevention.⁸⁰

Since the early 1970s child maltreatment prevention campaigns have been implemented across the country. In large part, they have been tremendously successful at making child abuse a social issue and bringing it to the forefront of the public's concerns. Studies show that the public is now knowledgeable about child maltreatment and considers it an important issue. Public awareness campaigns have effectively raised awareness of the existence of the problem from less than 10% to greater than 90% since the mid-1970s.⁸¹ Nevertheless, such campaigns have not been able to garner significant public support of child maltreatment prevention efforts, nor have they been able to motivate positive behavior change at the individual level.

While the public is very aware of the issue of child maltreatment, they do not believe they can prevent it nor do they understand how to prevent it.⁸²

To better understand this issue, Prevent Child Abuse America, with support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, initiated a unique project to examine public opinion, communications research, and media coverage and to use that information to develop a more effective public awareness message to further child maltreatment prevention efforts. Collaborating with Frameworks Institute and Public Knowledge and Societal Logic, Prevent Child Abuse America undertook a strategic frame analysis of the issue of child abuse and neglect.⁸³ This research found that Americans see child abuse as a very serious problem. They believe implementing child abuse prevention activities is extremely important, however, the average American thinks that prevention means reporting suspected abuse. Americans cannot clearly define child maltreatment prevention, nor do they believe they can do anything to affect child maltreatment. This, in part, stems from an overwhelming imbalance between media coverage of the negative aspects of child abuse and neglect compared to its coverage of potential solutions to the problem. Much of the public's understanding of child maltreatment comes from the media, where child abuse is typically portrayed as a criminal atrocity and a failure of child protective services. The focus is on horrific cases of physical abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse. As a result, the average American will picture the worst case scenario when you ask them to describe child abuse and neglect. They believe child abuse is intentional, extreme, perpetual, and, not preventable.⁸⁴

Findings from this research also suggest that current solutions to the issue of child maltreatment and “calls to action” result in frustration for the general public. The current campaign model has not been successful in finding non-stigmatizing ways to engage in child maltreatment dialogues with parents or communities, which are not considered to be an indictment of a parent or family, or an intrusion into family life. Societal values, including the belief in family privacy and the sanctity of one's home, influence American's apprehension to address the issue of maltreatment.

Reframing Prevention Messages

Public awareness efforts for child maltreatment prevention are at a crossroads. The prevention community can either continue to raise awareness of the issue of child maltreatment with old messages, while the public continues to feel powerless to prevent maltreatment, or it can redesign prevention messages to focus on changing individual and community behaviors to better support nurturing parenting and families/communities. There is a growing consensus in the field that the prevention community needs to change the focus of its prevention message in order to accomplish the following goals:

- > To create a community climate in which children are valued and families are strengthened.
- > To create public will in support of policies benefiting parents and families.
- > To motivate and enable positive changes in individual behavior because ultimately, individual behavior is what makes a difference.⁸⁵

To develop these new messages, Prevent Child Abuse America has focused on two communications strategies that have been used successfully in other social change efforts - strategic framing and social marketing.

Strategic Framing

Framing is an approach to communications research and practice that pays attention to the public's deeply held worldviews and assumptions.⁸⁶ As individuals and society, we have preconceived notions, personal experiences, and societal modes and myths. The manner in which an individual and society processes new information is related to their worldviews and assumptions. These worldviews or “frames” reflect our association of specific issues with deeply held, durable societal values. Once evoked, the frames provide the context through which we process information and solve problems. People adapt new messages or new stories to frames that they already have set in their mind. In other words, they translate information to conform to a theory they already have in place. For example, with the issue of child abuse prevention,

- > Individuals may have the preconceived notion that people who abuse their children are bad people.
- > They may have had a personal experience in which they were spanked but feel that they “turned out fine.”
- > They may share a widely held societal belief that no one should be able to interfere with the way they parent their children.

Each of these frames will impact the way in which these individuals process information about parenting and perceive the role of the community in supporting parents. Effective communication of a prevention message means “framing” the issue of child maltreatment prevention differently. Framing means communicating issues using carefully selected words, phrases, and images to cue a certain response. The power of framing can be seen in Diagram 6.1, which demonstrates ways the following phrases position social issues.⁸⁷

Diagram 6.1		
Female circumcision	or	Female genital mutilation
Learning disabilities	or	Learning differences
Pro-life	or	Pro-choice
Gun control	or	Constitutional rights

The way an issue is framed explains who is responsible and suggests potential solutions conveyed by images, stereotypes, messengers, and metaphors.⁸⁸ The way the story is told, including the choice of a narrator and the way the message is framed, determines if one views the story as a personal or community problem. For example, if a parent says that being a parent is hard and sometimes they lose control, we see it as a personal problem - “that person needs to get some help.” However, if a pediatrician says that it is hard for all parents to raise children, and that without support, the stress can lead parents to lose their temper, individuals are more inclined to see it as a community problem - “we need to help parents.” This is important in creating the public will to address the issue of child maltreatment. Changing the focus of child abuse prevention from focusing on individual bad choices and behaviors (episodic framing) to societal responsibility to support families (thematic framing) is a critical step in public awareness initiatives. Additionally, child abuse prevention messages must associate the problem with enduring societal values, communicate community responsibility, and connect the problem to solutions that appear relevant and feasible.

As the prevention field wrestles with the challenge of developing new messages, two hurdles must be overcome. First, the public’s lack of understanding of normal child development may lead people to believe that a young child is being intentionally disobedient, when in fact, the child may be overwhelmed or tired and not able to fully control his/her behavior. This may lead some people to believe that children must be disciplined in order for them to behave.⁸⁹ Societal focus is typically not on supporting a child’s cognitive and social/emotional development, but on ensuring that the child behaves. Second, our society’s value on family privacy significantly hinders effective support from the larger community. The “family bubble” reflects the public’s belief in not interfering in another family’s problems unless some damage has obviously been done to a child.⁹⁰ As a result, parents assume they should be able to parent without help from others and communities believe that parents should be left alone. These frames make it challenging for prevention messages calling for communities to support families to promote behavior change among individuals and communities.

Social Marketing

Social marketing is the use of commercial marketing techniques and strategies to promote the adoption of behaviors or values that will improve the health or well-being of the target audience or society as a whole. The social marketing approach differs from traditional health and human services approaches. In social marketing, you design messages/materials/programs from the targeted audience’s point of view.

There are three strategies used in social marketing to motivate behavior change.

- > By Convincing (Education) - This strategy proposes that if you give people enough information they will voluntarily adopt the desired behavior. Examples of campaigns employing this strategy that worked: breastfeeding, Back to Sleep, and the “truth” anti-smoking campaign.
- > By Enticing (Marketing) - This strategy says that if we give people enough motivation they will voluntarily adopt the behavior change. Examples of campaigns using this strategy include disposable diaper manufacturers sending out free coupons, free infant formula giveaways, condom giveaways to decrease incidence of HIV infection, and designated driver campaigns where designated drivers receive free sodas at bars.
- > By Law - With this strategy, people are given powerful incentives or fear of severe punishment in order to adopt the behavior change. Examples include tax deductions for charitable giving, insurance discounts for being a “safe” driver, and the “Click It or Ticket” seatbelt campaign.

One of the most important aspects of social marketing is defining a target audience. It is too easy to say that parents are your targeted audience. There are endless variations of parents today, all with different experiences, influences, and parenting beliefs. What appeals to a single, teenage mother is very different from what appeals to a forty-year-old married father. When targeting an audience, you must be as specific and distinct as possible, taking into consideration the age of the family’s children, level of education, geographic location, marital status, and other characteristics that define their perspectives and experiences.

Child abuse prevention public awareness efforts have been effective in raising knowledge of child abuse as a social problem, but should now move toward new messages that tell the public - clearly and in language that resonates with their own views and assumptions - how to prevent the problem from occurring in the first place. Recognizing the importance of a new public awareness campaign about parenting and community support of families, the Task Force on Child Abuse Prevention recommends:

Rec. 6.1. PCA North Carolina, in partnership with the NC Division of Public Health, should take the lead in developing a public education and marketing campaign aimed at encouraging community members to support parents by promoting positive parenting behaviors and increasing public support for programs and resources aimed at strengthening positive family interaction. This initiative should use the latest research on public awareness efforts for child maltreatment prevention and should be coordinated with efforts of the Child Maltreatment Prevention Leadership Team to promote positive parenting behaviors, increase protective factors, and reduce risk factors. PCA North Carolina and the NC Division of Public Health should report on the progress towards implementing this recommendation to the Child Maltreatment Prevention Leadership Team by July 2006 and annually thereafter.

Strategy 2 - Comprehensive Grassroots Violence Prevention Efforts

Over the last few decades, acts of violence have become increasingly pervasive in American life. There is a growing awareness that violence now constitutes one of the country’s most pressing public health problems and is more dangerous to children than most childhood diseases combined. The Centers for Disease Control and other national agencies are giving this issue increased attention, as is a grassroots movement comprised of parents, healthcare providers, and community members focused on the prevention of violence. Such efforts are critical to child maltreatment prevention because the larger societal context of violence creates an environment that places healthy parenting and healthy child development in jeopardy. Supporting and encouraging such anti-violence efforts in North Carolina is intricately linked to the ultimate success of our child maltreatment prevention initiatives.

What is violence?

In broadest terms, violence can be defined as actions by people against other people to intentionally threaten, attempt, or inflict physical, emotional, or psychological harm.⁹⁶ Different types of violence include child maltreatment, juvenile aggression, sexual violence including sexual harassment, domestic violence, homicide, suicide, and elder abuse/neglect.⁹⁷ Many of these forms of violence are not discrete phenomena, but co-occur within families and communities.⁹⁸ For example, in 30%–60% of the homes where one type of family violence (domestic violence or child abuse) is present, the other is present as well.⁹⁹

Violence Permeates American Life

Deborah Prothrow-Stith and Howard Spivak, authors of *Murder is No Accident: Understanding and Preventing Youth Violence in America*, noted that the high rate of violence in the United States has evolved over decades from an imbalance of too many risk factors and too few protective factors. They emphasize the culture's admiration of violence, particularly violence in entertainment, and state, "Children learn to use violence from the media. Television is the most obvious conveyer of the value, success and reward attributed to super-heroic, violence responses to problems... Five decades of sound scientific research have documented this fact and demonstrated direct causality between the viewing of violence on TV and the displaying of violent behavior."¹⁰² This violent culture creates an environment in which child maltreatment is more likely to occur.

Engaging Communities in the Prevention of Violence

Communities can play an important role in the prevention of violence and child maltreatment. Violence must be viewed in a social context, which will require a change in social norms. This change is more likely to occur when the people affected by a problem are defining the problem and are engaged in solving it.

A key step in the public health approach is to engage the community in actively changing social norms around violence, both in terms of what is acceptable behavior and in attitudes toward violence. Engaging communities in grassroots efforts to change our culture's glamorization of violence and acceptance of violence must be a part of a comprehensive approach to the prevention of child maltreatment. Using community organizing strategies, mass media, and media advocacy to change organization and societal policies and to affect community norms will be critical strategies within this larger effort. As demonstrated through public health initiatives, such as anti-smoking campaigns, strategic use of the mass media in combination with community

Table 6.2

U.S. Violence Statistics

- > In 2001, homicide claimed the lives of 20,308 Americans. Suicide was responsible for the deaths of 30,622 Americans.⁹¹
- > In 2002, more than 877,700 young people ages 10 to 24 were injured from violent acts. Approximately one in thirteen required hospitalization.⁹²
- > Homicide is the second leading cause of death among young people ages ten to twenty-four overall. In this age group, it is the leading cause of death for African-Americans, the second leading cause of death for Hispanics, and the third leading cause of death for American Indians, Alaskan Natives, and Asian Pacific Islanders.⁹³
- > Nearly 5.3 million intimate partner victimizations occur each year among U.S. women ages eighteen and older. This violence results in nearly two million injuries and nearly 1,300 deaths. There were 29,573 firearm-related deaths among the female population in 2001.⁹⁴
- > According to the National Violence Against Women Survey, one in six women and one in thirty-three men in the United States have experienced an attempted or completed rape at some time in their lives.⁹⁵

Table 6.3

North Carolina Violence Statistics

- > Between January and June of 2004, the number of North Carolina deaths from violence was 803. Of these violent deaths, 485 (60.3%) were from suicide and 288 (35.8%) were from homicide.¹⁰⁰
- > In North Carolina, 24% of women and 19.8% of men reported experiencing some type of physical and/or sexual violence during adulthood (since turning eighteen years of age).¹⁰¹

organizing can change social norms, motivate behavior change, and ultimately advance healthy public policies. The Task Force on Child Abuse Prevention believes that similar strategies can be utilized to create nurturing communities in which healthy parenting and healthy children can flourish.

In North Carolina, there are already a number of grassroots and state level activities focused on the prevention of violence. Recognizing the importance of violence prevention efforts to decreasing risk factors associated with child maltreatment, the Task Force on Child Abuse Prevention recommends that:

Rec. 6.2. PCA North Carolina, in collaboration with the NC Division of Public Health, the NC Division of Social Services, the NC Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the NC Domestic Violence Commission, the NC Partnership for Children, the NC Department of Public Instruction, the NC Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Mediation Network of North Carolina should work with and support ongoing grassroots efforts (and establish new ones where necessary) to establish community norms that support families and healthy child development, and reduce social acceptance of violence as an appropriate response to interpersonal conflict. Issues such as the acceptance of corporal punishment in North Carolina schools, the glamorization of violence, and the presence of violence in the media should be examined in these efforts. PCA North Carolina, the NC Division of Public Health, and other appropriate agencies shall report on the progress towards implementing this recommendation to the Child Maltreatment Prevention Leadership Team by July 2006 and annually thereafter.