

Plano advocates shine light on child abuse prevention

As national prevention month nears, advocates say early intervention is crucial

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By LEE HATFIELD / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month, and local advocates want residents to take notice of a problem that affects many more children than one might expect.

Last year, 737 children were placed in the care of Court Appointed Special Advocates of Collin County, including 350 younger than 5. Early intervention and public awareness are important factors in breaking the cycle of child abuse, officials say.

"One of our most difficult tasks is to help the community understand that child abuse is a real issue with long-term effects on our society," said Susan Etheridge, CASA's executive director.

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Child abuse affects every social and economic level and can often consist of multiple types of abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional and neglect, Ms. Etheridge said.

Neglect, which is the failure to provide basic needs for a child, is present in more than half of CASA's cases, Ms. Etheridge said.

Emotional abuse, meanwhile, is like hitting a child with words, said Dan Powers, senior director of clinical and administrative services at the Collin County Children's Advocacy Center in Plano.

"It's a consistent, ongoing situation which damages a child's self-esteem," Mr. Powers said. "The adult uses intimidation over and over."

Experts say children nearly always know their abusers.

Less than 4 percent of child abuse cases involve strangers – the rest involve abuse by family members, friends of the family or someone the child trusts, Mr. Powers said.

Substance abuse, including alcohol and narcotics, is also a common factor, Ms. Etheridge said.

To protect children, adults can educate them about their rights and believe them if they complain of abuse and seek professional help, Ms. Etheridge said.

"Well-meaning parents often don't realize the dangers and don't know how to protect their kids," she said.

Parents also can safeguard their children by being proactive, such as never letting them enter a public bathroom alone or requesting more information about adults supervising children at a summer camp, Ms. Etheridge said.

Under the Texas Family Code, anyone suspecting abuse is required to make a report. If you report abuse in good faith, you are protected from civil and criminal liability and you may remain anonymous.

Awareness and intervention are key – and adults must have the courage to speak up if they suspect abuse, the experts said.

"People don't want to hear about child abuse," Ms. Etheridge said. "If we could get people to listen, then we could have an impact on the problem."