

Oregonian
Portland, OR
01/20/05

When tragedy strikes, we open our hearts. Even on a small scale, when we see someone in distress, we feel compassion. If you saw a toddler wandering alone, crying, I believe that you, like I, would stop to see if that child needed help.

Yet every day, Oregon children at risk of being abused or neglected need our help, and we don't see them.

The 2004 Status of Oregon's Children County Data Book recently released by Children First for Oregon reports that in 2003:

◆ 9,450 Oregon children were seriously abused or neglected. After several years of decline, child abuse is again on the rise because deep cuts in prevention services coupled with the state's economic recession have increased stress on families.

◆ 13,450 of our children were in foster care, or last



IN MY OPINION

Samuel Henry

resort for children who are not safe at home.

There is no simple solution to child abuse — but that is not the same thing as saying there is no solution. Here are four steps to help prevent child abuse in Oregon.

First, we must understand that child abuse happens at every income level and in every culture. Adults who lack good parenting skills or who

can't meet their families' basic needs may become abusers. And so may adults, within or outside of the family, who suffer depression or mental illness, are involved in drug or alcohol abuse, or who feel unable to control their lives.

Second, we must offer programs such as Healthy Start, the statewide home visiting program that helps families learn how to meet the needs of their newborns. With intensive Healthy Start services, child abuse drops to half the rate in families not

served by the program. Relief nurseries, another proven program, help reduce homelessness, unemployment and substance abuse for high-risk families.

But programs are not enough. The third step is to understand that the most effective strategies provide families with "wrap-around" supports that address multiple needs. A child needs a doctor and a dentist, a caring teacher and a safe home. A child needs the love and nurturing of at least one adult. These are not luxuries; they are the means by which Oregon can cultivate healthy adults.

Finally, the fourth step to ending child abuse is to build communities that reach out to neighbors through faith organizations, businesses and personal commitment. We need to support the well-being of all children, to value their families and to honor their cultures.

Child abuse is not someone else's problem. It touches you and me. Because what a child learns at home today is what he or she will have to offer soci-

ety in the future.

Call your county's Commission on Children and Families. Ask how you can get involved. Or contact your state legislators and tell them what you think about helping children and families who need a hand.

We can make a difference in the lives of our most vulnerable children by working together to understand how prevalent child abuse is, by investing in programs that work, by creating communities that are supportive to vulnerable families and by building neighborhoods that nurture children.

As Gov. Ted Kulongoski said in his 2004 State of the State speech: "We can literally change our economic future by investing in people from the very beginning."

◆
Samuel Henry is chairman of the Oregon Commission on Children and Families, a state agency and its 36 county commissions that bring together citizens and community organizations to support Oregon's children and families.

Addressing Oregon's invisible tragedy of child abuse