

# WORKING P A P E R

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## Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States

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CHILD POLICY

# **If you had \$5 million to spend each year for the next five years to prevent child abuse and neglect in the United States, how would you spend it?"**

By Linda Baker

What an exciting time to be working in child abuse and neglect prevention. While child abuse and neglect statistics are sobering, innovative ideas are emerging and new partnerships are being forged, creating an environment ripe for positive change. It is important that during this inventive time we coordinate our efforts and maximize our resources. If I were in the position to make funding decisions over the next five years that would prevent child abuse and neglect, I would start by convening a national working group of researchers, policymakers, practitioners, parents, and other experts to provide guidance and feedback throughout the five-year funding period. Four subcommittees of the working group would be formed with each focused on one of the following four funding priorities.

## **Funding Outcomes and Activities**

### **1. Increase public understanding of and support for the prevention of child abuse and neglect through funding a national social marketing campaign.**

In order to significantly impact the rate of child abuse and neglect, there needs to be an increased public understanding of the risk and protective factors related to child maltreatment and an increase in public support for prevention activities. An effective social marketing campaign would influence people's ideas, attitudes, and behaviors, resulting in them taking action to create positive change. A successful campaign would also influence the behavior of parents at risk of abusing or neglecting their children by providing them with much needed information about when, where, and how to seek help.

We have all been involved in public awareness campaigns that have fallen short of our goals. It behooves us to closely examine previous successful social marketing campaigns, such as smoking cessation, to find the factors and messages that contributed to their success. One relatively new communication strategy that has shown positive results is that of strategic frame analysis and reframing child abuse and neglect ([www.friendsnrc.org/reframing/Index1.htm](http://www.friendsnrc.org/reframing/Index1.htm)).

Activities funded in the social marketing initiative would include the following:

- Engage a national marketing firm in the development and implementation of a results oriented social marketing campaign using reframing techniques.
- Identify the outcomes to be achieved and a process for measuring the impact of the campaign, and the effectiveness of the messages and strategies employed.
- Undertake a continuous evaluation of the outcomes of the campaign and revise strategies or messages as required.
- Prepare and distribute the social marketing research to those in the field, helping them understand the lessons learned and how to use the information for their campaigns.

## **2. Increase public policies and practices that promote and fund the prevention of child abuse and neglect.**

Public policies must align with and support prevention programs and practices that prevent child abuse and neglect. It is critical that national organizations provide the training, technical assistance, and information that their state chapters/affiliates require in order to successfully advocate for systemic changes needed to strengthen and support families. The critical role that foundations and parents play in advocacy efforts is recognized in the following activities that would be undertaken to increase public policies and practices that promote and fund prevention:

- Engage national organizations and funders in a collaborative process that will identify two to three major issues that they all agree to target for systems change. A shared plan will be developed with each national organization supporting its state chapter/affiliates by cosponsoring two joint regional meetings per year to foster a common vision and a sense of shared responsibility. Ongoing technical assistance will be provided to prepare the state organizations and parents to advocate for the identified changes in public and/or organizational policies and practices. This effort would be evaluated, and the lessons learned would be shared with those in the field.
- Engage foundations that fund prevention programs in setting joint funding priorities.
- Train parents in the art of advocacy and support their leadership efforts to advocate for family strengthening programs and policies.

### **3. Improve the understanding and usefulness of research for practitioners.**

For many frontline service workers and administrators, trying to read and make sense of a research article is akin to reading an article written in a foreign language. While research should inform practice, and practice should inform research, it won't happen to the fullest extent possible until we start speaking the same language. Activities to improve the understanding and usefulness of research include the following:

- Host a symposium for researchers, parents, practitioners, and funders to dialogue and problem solve the “research-to-practice” issues.
- Assist in “translating” research findings and new knowledge into practical applications that practitioners can use to improve programs and practices.
- Develop tools to assist practitioners in evaluating research in order for them to become better consumers of the research.

#### **4. Increase the number of prevention programs supported by evidence.**

Funders want to invest in programs that are based on evidence, and consumers have the right to expect they are participating in programs that will achieve positive outcomes. To promote the utilization of evidence-based and evidence-informed prevention programs and practices the following activities would be funded:

- Work with a select group of researchers to redefine scientific rigor to include a broader approach and new methods for measuring impact and determining evidence.
- Invite programs to apply to be “innovators” in evidence-based and evidence-informed programs. Selected programs would receive funding to participate in an evaluation process that would contribute to the qualitative and quantitative evidence supporting the program.
- Provide intensive training and technical assistance to help programs operationalize their definitions of service using a tool such as the FRIENDS Tool for Critical Discussions
- Construct measurement systems and collect data to ascertain the outcomes achieved through the services during the project period.
- Document the process and findings, and publish materials to inform the field.

Through our collaborative efforts to increase public understanding and support of prevention, to increase public policies and practices promoting and funding prevention, to improve the understanding and usefulness of research findings, and to increase the number of programs supported by evidence, we can create positive change. We can prevent child abuse and neglect. What an exciting time to be working in the field of child abuse and neglect prevention!

About the author:

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