

'We Can' strives to eliminate child abuse

TEXT

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The neglect and abuse of children is a problem that hasn't gone away.

"Last year there were 9,000 reported cases of child abuse and neglect in Clark County alone, and over 2.4 million nationwide," said Nancy Gott-Smith, assistant director for We Can, Inc. (Working to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect).

"We Can believes that if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. Child abuse and neglect are not just a parent's concern. Total community involvement is the key to prevention," said Gott-Smith.

Gott-Smith explained that because child abuse and neglect are directly related to delinquency, substance abuse, prostitution, violent crimes, and murder, preventing it is everyone's responsibility.

"It's not just a private family matter," she stressed.

According to We Can Board President Kathy Stewart, students at the Univer-

sity of Nevada, Las Vegas can play an important role in the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

"Public awareness is the key and students can educate themselves on the issue," Stewart said.

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"It is important to realize that positive parenting techniques, (alternatives to yelling, screaming, and hitting) do exist, and there are local groups and outlets for parents who feel they may become abusive," Stewart added.

"Students educated with this knowledge can better contribute to the community by suggesting these methods to family and friends," she pointed out. "Fur-

thermore, many students were abused as children and have a high risk of becoming abusers themselves. Education can stop this cycle," Stewart said.

We Can, founded in 1975, is the Southern Nevada chapter of the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse. We Can's resources include educational presentations, an in-house film and literary library, and brochures on parenting.

We Can also sponsors such programs such as the "Personal Safety Program", which is a sexual abuse prevention program for pre-school and elementary children, and "Parents Anonymous", which is a self-help intervention program for parents.

"It's been just a year since its institution, but the Parents Anonymous (PA) program has really taken off. What's unique about PA is that it's not only for parents who may have abused their children, it's also for parents who are just

having a difficult time coping with being a parent," explained Gott-Smith.

"PA allows parents to share experiences with other parents. Defenses and inhibitions are quickly broken down in a group environment. Group members identify traits similar to their own in fellow members. Though this identifying process, they become aware of behavior patterns profoundly affecting their own lives. An added benefit of PA program," notes Gott-Smith, "is free on-site child care."

Programs such as these coupled with education will take We Can closer to their goal, said Stewart.

"Our mission is to convince the community that a serious problem of child abuse and neglect does exist. This problem affects us all but help is available. Child abuse and neglect can be prevented."

"I think our motto says it all," explained Stewart. "If you believe in the ideal, it can become a reality."

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"Some need special therapy as well as the day treatment program," Swetnam said.

The early prevention program helps the children as well as their parents who are simultaneously involved in parent training groups and who must assist the teachers in the day treatment program.

Many of the parents are frequently involved in the program. They include single fathers, young, overwhelmed parents, older parents, grandparents who have obtained guardianship, and those parents who have recently adopted children. According to Christy Jonas, day treatment program coordinator, about 50 percent of the parents take it upon themselves to seek help and the other 50 percent have been court ordered or referred for treatment.

Games and activities are appropriately used for certain problems. Jonas said she once had a child who suffered from "terrible school phobia."

"He was afraid to go to school and the main goal was stabilization and for him to overcome his fear," Jonas said.

These children have such a wide variety of personalities and attitudes they all react differently during the same activity. "John" grabbed the bingo board and bent it while "Susie" placed many game pieces into her mouth, and "Ben" sat there not wanting to participate at all. Yet, the teachers never faltered or gave up. They tried to enforce the rules in such a way as to provide understanding and support to those who would otherwise not respond to any type of authority.

As the day came to an end, snacks were eaten while some were taken away for misbehavior. Toys were packed up, children grabbed their boxes, and they were ready to be loaded onto the bus that took them home. They lined up at the door, eyes wide and glimmering with a little more hope and confidence than when they first started their day. As they marched out the door, the last little boy turned around and waved good-bye.

I looked into his eyes and I could see that although his past story had not changed, his future one was starting to shine a little brighter.



CBS children listen intently to their instructor



A CBS instructor helps with individual learning.