



Safe Families for Children

By Jennifer Francis

In our approach to child abuse prevention as a society, we need to examine the circumstances leading to abuse in the institution where children spend the majority of their time: the family.

Studies show that the **lack of a social support system** leaves families especially vulnerable during a time of crisis. Historically, parents depended on extended-family and neighbours to weather the storms of life, however, family breakdown, migration, and other contributing factors have led to the absence of this social safety net for many parents. These socially isolated families are more susceptible to dependence on welfareⁱ and parents living in poverty are at a higher risk of neglecting or abusing their child(ren) due in part to a lack of supportⁱⁱ. When crisis strikes, such as a medical emergency, unemployment, or homelessness, many low-income, single-parents are not capable of providing a safe and caring environment for their children. These children become especially at risk for neglect or abuse as their parents struggle to cope with crushing circumstances and emotions.

Enter Safe Families for Children -- a volunteer movement that extends the community safety net by providing support to parents in crisis. Having undergone careful screening and training, a volunteer host family provides a loving environment where children can be safely placed in times of crisis. The child's parent is temporarily freed from the responsibility of caring for them and thus able to address personal issues without fear of losing custody. Through local churches, support is provided from volunteers who come alongside the parent and assist them in working through their crisis and also arrange for the provision of practical needs for the family.

Moreover, Safe Families creates extended-family-like supports between the volunteers and the family in need beyond the time of the placement so that placing parents leave not merely with increased physical stability but also with an organic social network to lean on for support as they raise their children.

The aim of the Safe Families program is to prevent child abuse, deflect children from entering the foster care system, and support and stabilize families. This is accomplished by focusing on the development of four protective factors: 1) parental empowerment and resilience; 2) social connections; 3) knowledge of parenting and child development; and 4) provision of concrete resources. The results have demonstrated a reduction in child maltreatment and an increase in family reunification and stability.

The Safe Families movement has a proven track record of success. In the delivery of this model internationally more than 35,000 placements of children have occurred to date, with more than 90% of them ending in the re-unification of children with their families.

To find out more about Safe Families or to get involved in a local chapter, visit www.safefamilies.ca (Canada) or www.safe-families.org (United States).

ⁱ Mrozek, A. & Walberg, R. (2009). *Private Choices, Public Costs: How Failing Families Cost Us All*. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage & Family Canada, (p.25).

ⁱⁱ Singer, R. (2003). The Impact of Poverty on the Health of Children and Youth. Campaign 2000. Retrieved March 10, 2010 from www.campaign2000.ca/resources/letters/Poverty_healthbackgrounder.pdf