

Working Together to Protect and Care for Our Most Vulnerable

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When we contemplate child abuse today the issues are endless and growing. The complex web of violence against children stretches from the effects of an imbalanced global economy, to the millions of children infected with HIV worldwide, to the under-educated and 6.8 million uninsured children in America, to child-on-child hate crimes.

The State of the World's Children 2007 UNICEF Report stated, "One third of the world's children live on less than one dollar per day. Thirty seven percent of United States children are in low-income families defined as less than \$27,772 annual income for a family of three." Marian Wright Edleman reported in the 2001 State of America's Children, "Every four seconds a child is born into poverty." The National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbus University reported, "When children are born into poverty they not only lack monetary resources, they lack adequate health and education."

Children, naturally vulnerable, become even more vulnerable when they belong to families living below the poverty level. Meager living conditions and survival strategies all too often place children in contexts that make them vulnerable to sexual exploitation, sexual assault and physical assault.

But it's not just children living in poverty who are more vulnerable to violence and abuse. Children across race, class and economics are at risk. Children at home, at school, in their neighborhoods, and even in their houses of worship are vulnerable, violated, and victimized. The National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, confirmed 906,000 child maltreatment cases from 1997–2006. Of these confirmed cases 61% are child neglect, 19% physical abuse, 10% sexual abuse, and 5% emotional/psychological abuse. The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence reports 1 out of every 5 teenage girls has been physically or sexually abused in a dating relationship. Recently, a young man drove by a barbershop and sprayed bullets, killing an innocent young male bystander, in an attempt to kill a young man who, allegedly, had been talking to his girlfriend. Even more recently, a middle school boy walked into a classroom and shot a fellow student in the head, killing him for being outwardly gay. Still, the number one killer of infants under the age of five in America is related to family violence. Children are still being molested by their clergy, and child pornography is still a flourishing internet business. And let us not overlook world-wide sex trafficking, war, and child labor. Children are the most vulnerable, oppressed, victimized and violated persons on this earth.

In the Christian faith tradition, believers are mandated to care for the most vulnerable, the widow, the stranger and the orphan (Lev. 19:33–34 and elsewhere). Jesus actually warns us to be

very careful how we treat children (Matthew 18:6). He said it would better for us to be tossed into the sea with large stones tied around our necks than to harm a child. I think it is correct to say that being righteous stewards of the power and privilege of adulthood as it relates to children is part of Christian discipleship. Not only are we called to individual discipleship, David Jensen wrote in *Theology of Childhood*, “Our communities must become places and practice of sanctuary to confirm the mandate to shelter the most vulnerable when agencies fail and children need safety and resources for physical and spiritual growth.”

All of our faith traditions, one way or another, call us to recognize and respond to children differently than the world does. We are challenged to see children as full and wholly people of God, not little people who will grow up to be people of God. Children are constantly described as gifts from God, vessels used by God, seeds of God’s promise, and protected by God. Childhood is a sanctified part of humanity and is holy simply by the relationship with God. David Jensen states children are holy because of whose they are, children of God, made in the Image God.

Here at FaithTrust Institute we are called to partner, to work together to protect all children. With the refocusing of our initiatives on healthy families and safe and healthy congregations, we will continue to connect the dots between love, faith, justice and violence against children. We are determined to help faith communities become sanctuaries of safety and resources for all children. We will continue to work with our partners to transform thinking, and systems in our cultures from the minimization of the value of children to valuing, protecting and celebrating the full humanity and worth of all children. We will continue to work with our policy partners to lobby for legislation that will serve and protect children. We will continue to work with family and domestic violence centers to create and maintain collaborative community responses to child abuse. We will continue to help partner faith communities with child advocates. We are committed to articulating an advocacy theology and an ethic of care and protection for children.

This Child Abuse Awareness Month let us join together in spirit and passionate anticipation of the beautiful possibilities, and the new beginnings that can and will spring forth as we remain faithful to our work for children.