



Reading is one of the most valuable things a parent can do with her child. Don't have a kid at home? Read or play with a grandchild, niece, nephew, neighbor — your help can give parents a much-needed break. BigStock photo

Columns

We all can help raise happy, healthy children

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By Jim Provenza

As Nelson Mandela once said, “There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.”

While parents clearly have the primary role in nurturing children, all of us can help strengthen families and assist parents in raising healthy, happy and thriving adults. We can all protect children from adversity and trauma by committing to supporting strong families and preventing child abuse and neglect.

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month. During this month, we raise awareness of the thousands of children who are abused or neglected every year. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states that there were 678,932 victims of child abuse and neglect reported to Child Protective Services in the United States in 2013.

According to 2012 data, 78 percent of the victims of child maltreatment were victims of neglect. Because all children deserve the right to grow up without being maltreated, we also want to talk about what protects children and prevents them from becoming victims.

One important way to prevent child abuse and neglect is to strengthen families. Strong families are more resilient and are better able to manage stress, adversity and trauma. Parents in strong families are also less likely to behave in ways that can negatively impact their children.

The Strengthening Families Framework has identified five research-informed protective factors that families need to succeed and thrive, even in the face of risk and challenges. These factors protect against risk factors and poor outcomes for both children and families, promote strong families and optimal development for children, and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect.

Parents in strong families have resilience; social connections; knowledge of parenting and child development; concrete support in times of need (e.g., access to food, health care, housing and needed services); and the ability to help children develop social and emotional competence.

All parents need help in developing protective factors. To help parents learn more about child development and children's social and emotional competence, Yolo County Children's Alliance has developed an expanded Toolkit for Families called Talk+Play=Connect; Time with your kids ... It Adds Up.

In this toolkit, parents and caregivers can learn about why talking and playing are so important for children's development and get tips to help them communicate better with their children. There are also many fun, easy ideas for how to play and connect with children at three routine times of the day: in the morning, at mealtimes, and at bedtime.

Because children change quickly as they age, the tips and ideas are organized by children's developmental stage: baby, toddler, preschooler, school-age and teenager. The toolkit is available in English, Spanish and Russian at www.yolokids.org/forfamilies.

Parents also need help from family-serving organizations, like local Family Resource Centers and the Yolo Crisis Nursery, which provide assistance, services and referrals.

Friends, relatives, neighbors, teachers, medical professionals and concerned citizens can help, too. We can all support families raise healthy, happy, and strong children.

So what can you do to strengthen families?

If you are a parent, you can read the Talk+Play=Connect Toolkit for Families and try out the ideas that feel right for you and your family. You can learn about your child's development and appropriate expectations for your child's age from websites, books or classes.

You can also take time for yourself and for visiting with friends and relatives. We all take better care of others when we feel supported and replenished.

If you are a family-serving provider, you can think about what you can do to support parents' protective factors and their ability to parent effectively. You can learn more about the protective factors at the Center for the Study of Social Policy (<http://www.cssp.org>).

If you are a neighbor, grandparent, friend or concerned citizen, you can find an organization that serves families and children and offer a donation of either time or money. If you are friends with parents, you can support them by empathizing, sharing laughs and finding ways to support them, like providing a meal during a tough time.

You can spend time with your niece, grandchild or your neighbor's child and provide child care to give a parent a break.

Let's all take responsibility to help families raise healthy and happy children. Let's work together to strengthen families throughout Yolo County.

— *Jim Provenza of Davis represents District 4 on the Yolo County Board of Supervisors.*