

OVERVIEW for The Prevention Social Worker

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Parenting Is Far From Easy

It is difficult to understand how society has come so far in so many different areas and, as critical an issue as raising children, we have faltered by so much. No parent wants to be labeled a bad parent, but that's exactly what happens when some parents fail to receive timely assistance. We need to stop searching for a location where to point the finger of blame and focus on solutions. We can dramatically improve lives by creating a preventive safety umbrella to ensure that **all** parents have the tools which they need to succeed as parents so that their children will not just get by but also flourish.

With very few exceptions, every parent wants to provide a safe and nurturing home so that their child/ren can grow up to be their best. Parenting is considered one of the most difficult jobs in the world but how many parents actually receive any training? Good parenting takes much effort, guidance and assistance. For those who did not have a very good role model when they were parented, parenting is drastically more difficult and even impossible for some. Unless a parent is persistent and tenacious in seeking help, usually very little assistance comes their way.

Let's Get This Right

Just because the United States is considered to be a rich country, and just because we've been doing it this way for a long time, it doesn't mean we should keep on repeating the same mistakes. Unfortunately, the problem has only gotten worse in the last 10-25 years with no consensus for a turnaround. Instead, I envision a country where life is safe for everyone, where each person truly realizes their dreams and the possibilities are endless for what can be accomplished. Such a place would have little if any crime, hunger, homelessness and other maladies, and it is entirely possible.

We Have the Resources

But We Are Missing the Boat Since We Hold Too Many of the Wrong Records

Even though the United States is one of the world's richest countries with approximately one-third of the world's 1,426 billionaires, and 5,231,000 millionaires, numerous success stories, countless health and other miracles happening every day, as well as endless potential to do incredible good in so many arenas, we still hold too many of the world's worst records. For example, between public and private, the United

States has the largest prison population in the world.¹ Based on that number alone, we incarcerate more than any other country. When using prison rates (i.e., rate incarceration per 100,000 people), the United States holds the unpleasant position of third in line after Cuba and North Korea, respectively. At an average cost of \$31,307 per inmate, taxpayers pay over \$75 billion² per year. After adding in the cost of probation and parole at a conservative average \$2,050 per year for another 7,300,000 people, the figure jumps to almost \$90 billion. That's a lot of money being spent with very little return on our investment. Instead, we need to cost effectively and humanely prevent as many incarcerations as possible without compromising public safety.

Substance Abuse

Another huge problem area we are currently experiencing is substance abuse. According to a 2011 National Survey on Drug Abuse and Health: Summary of National Findings, "... an estimated 22.5 million Americans aged 12 or over were current (past month) illicit drug users, meaning they had used an illicit drug during the month prior to the survey interview. This estimate represents 8.7% of the population aged 12 or older.³

Experimentation with an addictive substance all too often leads to untreated addiction. The Substance Abuse Health and Services Administration's NSDUH reports that 21.6 million persons (8.4% of the U.S. population) aged 12 or older needed treatment for an illicit drug or alcohol use problem in 2011. Of these individuals, only 2.3 million (10.8% of those who needed treatment) received treatment at a specialty facility (i.e., hospital, inpatient, drug or alcohol rehabilitation or mental health center). In other words, 19.3 million people (7.5% of the population aged 12 or older) needed treatment for an illicit drug or alcohol use problem but did not receive it.

Untreated substance abuse and addiction ends up costing everyone through violence, property crimes, DUIs, prison expenses, emergency room visits, child abuse and neglect, lost child support, foster care, welfare, reduced productivity, unemployment and deaths in the worst cases. We as a society end up paying an estimated \$559 billion for illegal drugs, alcohol and tobacco addiction.³ That \$559 billion amount doesn't even include other health and safety implications such as child abuse, domestic violence, family disintegration, school failure and the loss of employment.⁴

¹ Available from <http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2014/09/17/3568232/the-united-states-had-even-more-prisoners-in-2013/>

² Cost of a Nation of Incarceration dated April 22, 2012. Available from http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-3445_162-57418495/the-cost-of-a-nation-of-incarceration/

³ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Summary of National Findings, Rockville, MD 2013, p. 1. Available from <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUHresultsPDFWHTML2013/Web/NSDUHresults2013.pdf>

⁴ National Institute on Drug Abuse: The Science of Drug Addition. "NIDA InfoFacts: Understanding Drug Abuse and Addition," February 2011. Available from <http://www.nida.nih.gov/infofacts/understand.html>

Getting the right help in a timely fashion saves in both the high price of human suffering and the huge dollar figure to society. Turning this around is possible with effective addition treatment programs which reduces the cost of drug-related crimes by \$4 to \$7 for every dollar spent. The savings increases to \$12 with outpatient programs.

Teenage Pregnancies

Taking a look at teenage pregnancies, the 2013 figures for the United States reveal 273,105 live births to 15-19 year olds.⁵ As in past years, the United States teen birth rate is notably higher than in other industrialized countries. Bringing this to a county level, in Miami-Dade County, Florida alone, there are two high schools which taught 192 pregnant teenagers during the 2012-2013 school year. Thankfully the number of pregnant teenagers has been decreasing over recent years, but 192 is still far from a small number.

High School Dropouts and Other Social Statistics

The present U.S. high school dropout rate is alarmingly at 25.3% (although higher for some minorities).⁶ Equally alarming statistics exist corresponding to other social problems such as crime, delinquency, family and other violence and suicide, but the picture is becoming frightfully clear in that we are digging ourselves into a hole that is only getting bigger. The unclear part is the interrelatedness of social problems in that one leads to another and then another and another (e.g., child abuse leads to dropouts which leads to runaways which leads to crime, delinquency and/or violence). However, when one social problem such as child abuse is prevented, usually one, but more likely several other social problems, are also prevented as well.

We Need to Turn This Around With More Prevention Work

The big picture is being missed now and we are failing in numerous areas. Instead of continuing to do what we've been doing, we can be much more effective and efficient in the way we deal with people. For example, on average it costs \$88,000 per year to incarcerate a juvenile delinquent⁷, with a return to crime typically occurs 50-70% of the time.⁸ Or we could spend approximately \$3,500 per individual to put the same youngster through a youth rehabilitative services program (e.g., AMIkids, f/k/a Dade Marine Institute in Miami, Florida) which boasts an outstanding 25% recidivism rate. That means a teen going through the AMIkids program is two and one half times less likely to go back to crime than standard incarceration. Even better would be to reach the at-risk teenager before one or more problems develop by offering mentoring and tutorial services. Including one or both parents or guardians in a long-term planning process would further improve the outcome for teens. To really make a significant and long-lasting impact, ensuring that each teen receives a good understanding of *his* or *her*

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: About Teen Pregnancy. Available from <http://www.cdc.gov/TeenPregnancy/AboutTeenPreg.htm>.

⁶ Available from <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/06/high-school-graduation-rate-hits-40-year-peak-in-the-us/276604/> and http://www.edweek.org/media/diplomascount2013_release.pdf.

⁷ Available at <http://www.aecf.org/resources/no-place-for-kids-full-report/>.

⁸ Id.

self, *his* or *her* culture, *his* or *her* work, and *his* or *her* community in relation to the world would have a weighty impact for most teens so that the teen's appetite is whet for learning. In other words, as a society, for this example as well as so many others, we now spend more and receive less when just the opposite should be happening.

How could we have come so far, with so many concerned citizens, programs and agencies, with so much expertise and still have so many problems in so many different areas? There is a reason why so many areas of our lives are specialized and prevention needs that same attention to be a major part of the solution.

A Decent Shot at Life and the Vision of This Website

It's as if we need to reorder our priorities. President Obama has the right idea when he says, "I told them that they were right: government couldn't solve all their problems. But with a slight change in priorities we could make sure every child has a decent shot at life and meet the challenges we face as a nation."⁹ He clearly sees the ramifications and connectedness of his decisions. "Moreover, whenever I write a letter to a family who has lost a loved one in Iraq, or read an email from a constituent who has dropped out of college because her student aid has been cut, I'm reminded that the actions of those in power have enormous consequences — a price that they themselves almost never had to pay."¹⁰ Perhaps one of the reasons that we find ourselves in this mess is because most people who serve in Washington have been trained either as lawyers or as political operatives—professions that tend to place a premium on winning arguments rather than solving problems."¹¹ Even though Americans across the nation are very different, we basically share the same hopes and dreams. That bond holds us together and it is the same bond that can make the vision of this website a reality.

Timely Assistance

Giving parents the timely assistance they need (including positive parenting skills which encourage strong family relationships to raise cooperative, confident and compassionate children) would prove the most fruitful. Recognizing that for any positive adjective about parenting, there is an equally negative one to describe its difficult nature. Even though parenting can provide the most wonderful feeling in the world, it certainly has its share of exasperating moments. Reflecting on his upbringing, actor Leonardo DiCaprio knows how fortunate he was with his own parents but acknowledges that "ninety percent of the people I meet are dealing with issues they can't overcome because of bad parenting. That's the truth."¹² It should not be that way but unintentionally it happens far too often.

The Importance of Timely Assistance: Healthy Families America, etc.

⁹ Obama, Barack (2006) The Audacity of Home: Thoughts of Reclaiming The American Dream, p. 7.

¹⁰ Id., p. 48.

¹¹ Id., p. 48.

¹² Rader, Dotson (October 5, 2008). Leonardo DiCaprio: 'I Want To Stand For Something'. Parade – The Sunday Newspaper Magazine. pp. 4-5.

The dilemma is how best to assist parents so that they can effectively guide, discipline and raise their children. Healthy Families America (HFA) is a perfect example of an excellent national program model that promotes positive parenting and enhances child health and development which ultimately ends up preventing child abuse, neglect and other poor childhood outcomes. This initiative is specifically designed to give expectant and new parents the help they need to give their children a healthy start. Presently services are only offered to families who are at risk for child abuse and/or neglect. Families participate voluntarily in this program and receive home visiting and referrals from trained staff.

The average annual cost per HFA family is \$1,950-\$5,768 depending on region with an average of \$3,348.¹³ Ninety percent of all the families who are invited to participate in the program accept services. Nationally each day, almost three children die from child abuse and neglect.¹⁴ That's three children too many. To date, HFA exists in over 430 communities in 35 states across the United States, Washington, D.C. and Canada. While 430 may seem like it covers a lot of territory, unfortunately it is only a drop in the bucket for the present need. When we spend more time and attention to cost-effectively prevent child abuse, that and many other horrific outcomes will also be prevented. With the proper tools and skills, all parents can be great parents and give their children the best possible start in life.

Wonderful programs like HFA for the littlest ones, AMIkids for the tweens and teens, and numerous other highly successful programs for children and families in between those years and older need to be scaled up to benefit the masses to greatly improve our current endless poor social outcome statistics. This author intends to be the conduit to connect the programs which will benefit the masses with people who have the foresight, motivation and money to scale them up. Growth would need to be slow and deliberate - not haphazard. This can be done in a controlled way so that we see our poor social problems statistics dwindling and people living more enriched lives with far fewer social problems.

I Hope For the Future

Under no circumstance would The Prevention Social Worker want to compromise any existing successful programs or services. Thus, The Prevention Social Worker does not intend to receive money which was earmarked or set aside for other social service projects. Instead, through a sharing of the possibilities that this approach holds, only "new" money would be used for this endeavor.

No doubt there are links between parenting and poor social outcomes. The complicated problems which are discussed herein will neither disappear on their own nor through current efforts. Numerous clear-thinking people must work diligently, be accountable and be in it for the long term to bring about real change. If there's one

¹³ Healthy Families America. Network Resources: Funding. Available at http://www.healthyfamiliesamerica.org/network_resources/funding.shtml.

¹⁴ Prevent Child Abuse America's Healthy Families - Program Facts and Features. Available at http://www.healthyfamiliesamerica.org/downloads/hfa_facts_features.pdf

thing that The Prevention Social Worker has learned, it's that when one's heart, mind, passion and unending devotion are dedicated to accomplish something, even the most impossible feats can be achieved. The author of this paper cares, delivers and she is dedicated to make the vision of drastically reduced social problems a reality when she can dedicate her full-time efforts to make this vision a reality.

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