

# CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO THE CHALLENGE OF CHRONIC CHILD NEGLECT

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Date: June 14, 2007  
Location: The Children's Center, 492 First Avenue, at 29<sup>th</sup> Street  
Sponsored by: **The New York Center for Children**, in association with **Prevent Child Abuse America** and the **Administration for Children's Services**  
Conference Chairs: **Katherine Teets Grimm**, MD, Medical Director, The New York Center for Children, and **Anne Reiniger**, JD, LMSW, Chair, Board of Directors, Prevent Child Abuse America  
Audience: 200 professionals, including teachers, guidance counselors, lawyers, child advocates, preventive, protective and foster care agency caseworkers, law enforcement, doctors, nurses, social workers and child care staff  
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- Co-occurring conditions of chronic child neglect often include: deep poverty, unemployment, homelessness, social isolation, substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence and chronic illness.
- A holistic approach to chronic child neglect is important. Professionals should look beyond the immediate reasons a family is reported for child maltreatment and evaluate the current allegations in the context of the family's history.
- Successfully engaging families requires establishing a positive, respectful and trusting relationship with them. Concrete resources and services help to engage families in these efforts.
- Reward systems linking realistic expectations to meaningful rewards are a significant motivator to many people. Positive reinforcement to modify behavior of families is a strategy that can reduce the incidence of chronic neglect.
- Maternal depression is often a key factor in cases of chronic child neglect. It is important that parental depression be identified and addressed with evidence-based treatments. Innovative programs that provide social support, encouragement and hope for the future should be provided to families affected by depression and neglect.
- Home visiting programs such as Healthy Families New York and Nurse-Family Partnership offer the support and skill-building tools needed by families and children at risk of chronic neglect.

Child neglect is the most common form of child maltreatment reported to Child Protective Services with lifelong devastating effects on children. Unfortunately, as Dee Wilson has observed, neglect is often assumed to be less injurious to children than physical abuse or sexual abuse, but this is not the case. Chronic neglect is characterized by the persistent failure or inability of parents to provide for their children's basic needs: housing, food, clothing, education, medical care and nurturance. Each year, close to 3,000,000 children are reported for abuse or neglect in the United States. Over 60% of the children are reported for neglect. Nearly 75% of reports of children under three years of age are for neglect. In New York State over 90% of maltreated children are neglected. Most troubling is that more than 40% of child abuse and neglect fatalities are neglect related.

Chronic child neglect includes cases in which there is continued or repeated neglect of children, often with many reports made. Approximately 1/3 of children reported for maltreatment are re-reported within five years and most often the subsequent report is for neglect. However, a large number of neglected children are also physically abused or sexually abused. In chronically neglecting or chronically maltreating families, social norms around parenting have eroded or collapsed.

Chronic neglect has serious detrimental effects on children's cognitive and social development. Studies indicate that children's developmental competence declines with continued neglect. Other studies have suggested that brain development is adversely affected by pervasive and early neglect. Children who are neglected often do not have the opportunity to internalize a model of a positive relationship of nurturing and may display an impaired ability to relate appropriately to others in school, at work and as parents. These children are likely to have difficulties managing their emotions and calming down after becoming upset. Severe neglect is a form of trauma and severely neglected children display the full range of trauma symptoms.

Efforts to prevent subsequent victimization are not always successful for many maltreated children who suffer repeated neglect. Chronic neglect is often highly intractable to interventions and the child abuse and neglect field continues to search for evidence-based programs which are effective with these families. The multiple problems of the families put a premium on collaboration and on multidisciplinary team models of practice.

**“Creative Solutions to the Challenge of Chronic Neglect”** presented speakers from around the country and New York who provided valuable information about the connection between Chronic Neglect and Poverty. The forum highlighted an innovative program in Chicago, featured in [The Wall Street Journal](#), entitled “Pathways to Rewards: Using Positive Incentives to Motivate Poor Families” and a soon to be launched program in New York

City, “Opportunity NYC: Three Demonstrations Testing the Impact of Incentive-based Strategies on Poverty Reduction.” Participants heard about how ACS is working towards strengthening the response of the child welfare system to address Chronic Neglect and improve outcomes for these children.

Immediately following the conference, a preventive services fair featured 15 community-based programs from throughout New York City. It provided an opportunity to learn about programs providing safety nets to help prevent abuse and neglect. A directory of programs was distributed so that participants can refer families to programs in their community.

### **Keynote Speaker**

#### Alfonso Wyatt: “When Children Cry, Who Will Hear?”

Reverend Wyatt, Vice President of the Fund for the City of New York, kicked off the conference with an inspiring keynote address. He highlighted the importance of the work being done and how those in the field should be applauded and take care of themselves in order to be there for the children. As one of the attendees commented, “(He) motivated me to refresh myself in order to be an effective healer to the response of the cries of our children.”

### **Panel on Poverty and Chronic Neglect**

#### Dee Wilson: “Poverty and Chronic Neglect: An Epidemiological Perspective”

Mr. Wilson, Director of the Northwest Institute for Children and Families in Seattle, Washington, explained the connection between poverty and chronic neglect: Neglect is the form of child maltreatment with the strongest relationship to poverty, especially ‘deep poverty’. These families have a high rate of welfare dependence, homelessness, low levels of education and are often single parent families. In chronically neglectful families, social norms around parenting have eroded or collapsed often under the pressure of substance abuse, mental health problems and family violence. Parents are often depressed, demoralized and socially isolated.

Dee Wilson asserted that the relationships among poverty, substance abuse, mental health problems and trauma histories are not well understood. He advanced the hypothesis that depression plays an important causal role in that economic hardship. Trauma often leads to depression which then leads to substance abuse as a means of medicating depression. Deep poverty increases the rate of child maltreatment, especially neglect through elevated rates of mood disorders.

These families often have similar features: They are poor, troubled and hard to help. Several factors can address the morale of these families: social support and encouragement, hope for a better economic future, a sense of meaning and purpose, taking pleasure in small things, an ability to ask for and give help, and success in overcoming adversity. Innovative programs that

provide these supports must be provided and encouraged. Mr. Wilson shared that "...A better understanding of the effects of long term, severe and concentrated poverty on a parent's morale is needed to support interventions capable of ... bringing about a social world in which hope can thrive."<sup>i</sup>

#### Toby Herr: Pathways to Rewards, Using Positive Incentives to Motivate Poor Families

Ms. Herr, Executive Director of Project Match, in Chicago, Illinois, the sponsoring agency of the "Pathways to Rewards" program, described how this program of incentives seeks to move poor Americans toward economic and social stability by motivating them to improve their lives. This work requires a long term commitment of staff working closely with families in their community on a step by step basis. The goal of the Pathways program is to promote family and community stabilization by providing the structure, support, and incentives to the family (adults and children) to work towards individual goals around employment, academic and extracurricular activities and community involvement. It has four components: Setting goals, verifying goal achievement, redeeming points, and quarterly Recognition Events. Incentives are at the heart of the program and the celebrations are held to distribute awards and provide support by everyone in the community: while rewards are important, so is public recognition. Awards are determined between the case worker and the participant and have included: paying a utility bill, bicycles, computers, running shoes, etc. For many people linking realistic expectations to meaningful rewards is a real motivator. They have found that more children have improved their school attendance and grades and more parents are paying their rent on time and volunteering regularly in the community. Ms. Herr heralds this program as a piece of the puzzle in changing behavior for families caught up in the web of chronic neglect.

#### Raysa S. Rodriguez: Opportunity NYC, Three Demonstrations Testing the Impact of Incentive-Based Strategies on Poverty Reduction

Ms. Rodriguez, Senior Advisor, Youth and Community Programs, Office of the Deputy Mayor of Health and Human Services, New York City, described this soon to be launched (Fall 2007) anti-poverty initiative. The program is designed to evaluate the impact of incentive-based strategies on poverty reduction in three impoverished NYC neighborhoods. It will focus on families, adults and children and will provide monetary incentives to families living in poverty in achieving goals in three areas correlated with poverty: education, health and workforce skills. Smaller monetary incentives will be provided to children who meet their academic goals. The aim is to break the cycle of poverty by investing in human capital and improving outcomes for families living in poverty. There will be a rigorous evaluation of the program.

As the program has not yet been launched, Ms. Rodriguez did not have many details, but she indicated that community-based agencies in the three communities are involved in setting-up the program. There was great

interest about the implementation of “Opportunity NYC” and the potential benefits of the program for families known to the child welfare system.

Michael Bosnick: Strengthening the Response of the Child Welfare System to Chronic Neglect

Mr. Bosnick, Deputy Commissioner, Division of Policy and Planning, Administration for Children’s Services, shared the recently adopted policy of ACS in addressing chronic neglect of children. He noted that extreme poverty, unemployment, homelessness and social isolation are often key factors associated with chronic neglect. Some of the issues to be considered are substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence and chronic illness. He emphasized the importance of looking beyond the immediate reported incident of abuse or neglect and stressed the need to consider all allegations in the context of the family’s entire history. The emphasis is on safety of the children. Once safety has been assessed, the worker should approach the family in a holistic way—for example all of the children in the household should be considered, and comprehensive information should be obtained from the source of the report. The worker should engage the family in identifying their service needs and developing a comprehensive service plan with the family.

Elements of successfully engaging families include establishing a positive rather than an adversarial relationship with the family, helping parents understand the impact of neglect on their children and building a respectful and trusting relationship with the family.

**Evaluations**

More than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the audience who completed the evaluation gave the overall conference a rating of 4 or 5 (5 being the highest rating). They commented that the conference was “very interesting and exciting information shared”, “very informative”, “useful”, “thought provoking”, and “helpful with information about different agencies”, “Thanks!”

The audience found the panel on Poverty and Chronic Neglect “very interesting—great insight” and the highlighted programs “Excellent—positive outcomes are still happening in a negative world” and “very innovative and hopeful.”

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<sup>i</sup> Dee Wilson & William Horner, “Chronic child Neglect: Needed Developments in Theory and Practice”, Family in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services, Volume 86, No. 4, p.471

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