



# *United Way* **Community Matters**

**By Mary Lou Goeke**

## **Our Community United to Keep Children Safe**

April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month, a reminder to all of us of the opportunities we have to positively impact our community. When it comes to sensitive topics like child abuse, many find themselves shaking a shaming finger at parents. This is probably because most imagine the atrocious stories in the media of crimes against children and struggle to understand how adults can do such things.

In order for our community to become more united against the problem of child abuse and neglect, we first need to curb our tendency to generalize, assume, and judge. We also need to recognize that many of the risk factors associated with abuse and neglect go beyond simple "personal issues" and in most cases require support from friends, family, and/or professionals. Finally, we need to understand what child abuse and neglect actually is, as it is more complex than most know.

If domestic violence occurs in front of children, for example, the effects are traumatic and the incident can be reported. This is also true of chronic verbal arguing or emotional abuse. If an older child is left alone to care for younger children, this might also reach the threshold for reporting under the category of neglect. Some of these circumstances are not straightforward and require some degree of personal judgment on the part of the people filing the report or those processing the allegations. However, any time a child is placed in a situation that may be harmful or unsafe; a report should be filed with Family and Children's Services (831-454-2273).

Despite the ambiguity that is sometimes present in child abuse cases, the detrimental effects on children can be significant. Often, the effects of abuse and neglect lead to intergenerational cycles and children are raised within families where unhealthy

patterns seem, on some level, normal.

Many risk factors for abuse and neglect can be addressed by friends, teachers, doctors, or others in the community before abuse occurs. Social isolation is one example. Think for a moment if you know a caregiver with few adults to talk to; can you offer support? We also have the opportunity to help parents who suffer from depression, anxiety, or problems with substance abuse. Offer help contacting a therapist or drug and alcohol counselor, a ride to the doctor, or babysitting time so the caregiver can go alone. Friends in the midst of a conflict-ridden divorce might also benefit from support or time to themselves, particularly if they have arguments in front of children. Risk factors like poverty, unemployment, and limited knowledge of child development are more complex, but there are resources in the community that strive to help people with these precise issues. You might help parents locate community classes or other professional resources.

It is easy to blame parents who have abused their children and assume the issue is irrelevant to you and your family. However, the children who have experienced abuse and neglect are at risk for a variety of problems that impact our schools and neighborhoods, as well as the local budget. Stepping in early to help caregivers prevent abuse and neglect will not only impact that family, it will impact our community.

*For the past 16 years Mary Lou Goeke has been the Executive Director of the United Way of Santa Cruz County. She has 32 years of experience providing social services to elders, children and families. The mission of United Way is to improve the lives of the people of Santa Cruz County by convening the community to seek solutions to their needs and by efficiently raising funds for the human care programs the United Way supports. Their website is [www.unitedwaysc.org](http://www.unitedwaysc.org).*