

April – Child Abuse Prevention Month

By Radha Selvester (CDS Family and Behavioral Health Services Inc.)

North Florida School Days

For the past 30 years, attention has been focused on the prevention of child abuse during the month of April. 2009 statistics from the Child Welfare League of America indicate that there were more than 30,000 substantiated reports of abuse or neglect of children in Florida. That worked out to just over 3 abused kids per 1000. 156 children died due to this abuse or neglect in Florida.

Over 19,000 of these children were removed from their homes in Florida in 2009. They were placed with relatives, in foster care, or group homes. Children suffered from the abuse and neglect in their homes of origin, but some also experienced “systems damage” from being abruptly taken from what is familiar to them and forced to adapt to a new living situation, new school, and new friends.

Obviously we can't leave kids in a situation that is harmful – and the emotional damage done to children who are “rescued” from horrific abuse is certainly worth it. But there are so many “marginal” cases – where the cost-benefit ratio of child removal is questionable. Because of this, some new solutions have been pursued in recent years.

Northeast Gainesville (32609 zip code) had one of the highest rates of kids entering the foster care system in the state. It was chosen to try a new model where rather than immediately removing children from abusive or neglectful situations; social workers were trained to look for ways to assist parents so that they could safely raise their own children wherever possible.

A community resource center was created called the Library Partnership* – a joint endeavor of the Alachua County Public Library and Partnership for Strong Families. Now in its 5th year, it is much more than the sum of its two parts as dozens of other social services agencies offer parenting classes, financial literacy workshops, youth programs, free clothing, healthy living workshops, etc. at the Library Partnership. It is also a full service library branch, with a teen room full of computers, books, and other media.

The idea was such a success that another resource center was created by the residents of SW Gainesville last year. The South West Advocacy Group (SWAG)* partnered with Partnership for Strong Families, Linton Oaks Apartments, Alachua County, and many others and created a place for adults and children to go for experiences and training to improve their lives. They built a playground and planted gardens to encourage healthy lifestyles. A medical clinic component is being added to this resource center since access to health care is limited in that area.

Is the new model working? Only time will tell but the number of children being taken into the foster care system has dropped dramatically in Gainesville. It seems that many families are getting the help and support and education they need to stay together and work through their issues. Social services professionals are optimistic that we are on the right track. 30,000 kids abused each year in Florida is 30,000 too many! Even one is too many! We can all share in supporting struggling families so they can

raise their own children successfully. You can contact either resource center for information about their free programs and/or to volunteer.

For some helpful parenting tips go to:

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/preventionmonth/tipsheets.cfm>

If you are aware of any child being abused or neglected, please call 1-800-96-ABUSE (22873). This will get the process started for the family to get the help they need.

(Or you can do a text box – to report abuse or neglect, call 1-800-96-ABUSE)

CDS Family and Behavioral Health Services Inc. offers counseling for children age 6-17 and a residential counseling program at Interface Youth Shelters for youth age 10-17 at no cost to participants. Please call 352 244 0628 for more information.

*Library Partnership, 1130 NE 16th Ave, Gainesville 32609 (352) 334-0161. SWAG, 807 SW 64th Terr, Gainesville, FL 32607 (352) 505-6823.



Library Partnership



SWAG grand opening