

Keeping Kids Safe from Child Abuse

Inflicted trauma, also known as child abuse, is a common cause of injury and death in children. In Hamilton County in 2011 there were 14,208 substantiated cases of abuse or neglect¹. In the same year in Ohio, there were 164 deaths due to child abuse or neglect. Additionally, 37% of those cases indicated the child had prior incidences of child abuse or neglect and in 23% of the cases the child's primary caregiver had a prior history as a perpetrator². These numbers indicate a significant need and opportunity to intervene. The Mayerson Center for Safe and Healthy Children, the child abuse division of Cincinnati Children's Hospital, is working with three community practices to implement the Safe Environment for Every Kid (SEEK)³⁻⁵ initiative to reduce and prevent child abuse in the tri-state.

The SEEK program helps to identify family risk factors for abuse and intervene early, before abuse occurs. Risk factors for child maltreatment include; intimate partner violence in the home, caregiver mental illness or substance abuse, caregiver stress, and caregiver misunderstanding of child development and harsh parenting. Other causes of household stress, such as food insecurity and poor housing also contribute to an increased risk for child abuse⁶. The SEEK program helps community private practices screen for adversity and then provide targeted interventions through education, counseling and referral to community resources when screens are positive. The Mayerson Center is partnering with Children's Health Care of Batesville, Crossroad Health Center, and University of Cincinnati Family Medicine Tri-county office for this initiative.

The SEEK Parent Screening Questionnaire is a 15-item assessment tool that asks parents about food insecurity, harsh discipline practices, caregiver stress levels, caregiver depression, caregiver substance abuse, and intimate partner violence. The screen is designed and validated to be administered at well-child visits between 0-5 years of age and each participating practice has selected 1-2 well-child visits to administer the questionnaire. To strengthen parent engagement, physicians and other office staff train in motivational interviewing surrounding these issues. Motivational interviewing teaches medical professionals to educate families on their lifestyle choices, help caregivers understand how their risky behaviors affect their child(ren), and structure questions to initiate buy-in and healthy behavior change. Positive responses spark discussion between the family and medical professional and will result in 1) verbal and/or written education, 2) referral to community resource if caregiver is willing to accept help and change unhealthy behavior, and/or 3) follow-up with the family at the next visit. Education is developmentally appropriate and tailored to the age of the child.

The SEEK program has shown 31%³ reduction in Child Protective Service reports over a 3.5 year period, suggesting that for every 17 families who receive the SEEK model at least 1 case of abuse or neglect can be prevented. The program also shows fewer physical assaults among caregivers, greater satisfaction with parenting, and less frequent psychological aggression between caregivers and children⁴. The SEEK program shows tremendous promise in identifying families at risk for maltreatment and provides a concrete method for helping medical professionals intervene to build stronger family foundations.

For more information about SEEK contact Liz Hente at elizabeth.hente@cchmc.org

References

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