



**TAKING
ACTION
EARLY TO
PREVENT
VIOLENCE**

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Executive Summary

This is a time when the knowledge about the causes of violence and how to prevent it is greater than ever. While violence is part of daily life in far too many homes and communities in the United States, there is an opportunity to make significant strides in preventing it. Taking advantage of this opportunity means starting as early as possible, before violence is learned or reinforced. Early experiences — those that take place prenatally and through 5 years of age — impact the rest of an individual's life. Thus, the first steps to preventing violence require action in these early years.

A wide range of people, from law enforcement officials to child development experts to policy makers, are becoming increasingly aware of the impact of violence on young children and the relationship between violence prevention and the healthy development of young children. A growing body of evidence shows that: 1) supporting healthy early childhood development is an essential element in preventing violence and 2) protecting young children from experiencing violence, as victims or witnesses, is an essential part of ensuring their healthy development.

To understand the crucial link between early childhood development and violence prevention, it is necessary to understand that:

- **Early childhood is a critical time** during which essential intellectual and emotional abilities form. Keeping young children safe and nurturing them is protective against lifelong problems, including the risk of becoming involved in violence.
- **Early experiences impact brain development**, shaping the brain's physical growth and sculpting neural connections. This occurs primarily between birth and school age years, when every encounter a child has or lacks is formative.
- **Violence affects young children**, resulting in a 're-wiring' of the child's brain in which survival skills are preferentially developed at the expense of learning and other social skills.
- **Family, community, and society** are powerful in shaping young children's development.



The last decade of research on violence prevention resulted in the understanding that violence prevention needs to start earlier and that acting as early as possible, in the first five years of life, is critical to success. Despite the potential benefits of implementing violence prevention strategy with young children, inadequate attention has been given to what can be done in the early years. However, a number of talented researchers and practitioners have contributed to an expansive knowledge base. *FIRST STEPS* captures and shapes what is known about the intersection of early childhood development and violence prevention into a coherent strategy, *The Three Keys to Violence Prevention*. Pulling together the range of information from research and practice, *FIRST STEPS* is a tool enabling policy makers, funders, service providers, administrators, parents, and advocates to take action that will make a difference, in both the current lives of young children and in their future.



The Three Keys to Violence Prevention

Key 1:

Violence is complex and requires a comprehensive approach

The determinants of violence are multiple, complex, and often interrelated. Success in addressing these problems is more likely when practitioners work across disciplines and address multiple issues at a time. A successful strategy must include the collaboration and mobilization of a broad group of individuals, and a range of activities that link with, build upon, and add value to each other. To understand the necessary range of activities, violence prevention practitioners have used the *Spectrum of Prevention*,¹ a tool that enables people and coalitions to develop a comprehensive plan while building on existing efforts.



The Spectrum of Prevention

SPECTRUM LEVEL

EXAMPLES

1

Strengthening Individual Knowledge & Skills

- Provide caregivers with information about child development and teach them stress management, problem solving and boundary setting skills, and positive communication and discipline techniques.
- Build developmentally appropriate literacy skills in young children, for example, by encouraging caregivers to read to children frequently and providing books that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate.

2

Promoting Community Education

- Educate community members about the vulnerability of young children and the detrimental effects of abuse, neglect, and witnessing violence.
- Encourage safe gun storage in the home, including storing guns unloaded and away from ammunition, out of children's reach, and in locked boxes.

3

Educating Providers

- Ensure that professionals who work with young children and families are trained to identify substance abusing caregivers and affected children and provide them with developmentally and culturally appropriate care and support.
- Train childcare providers to model appropriate behaviors, understand how cultural beliefs influence behavior and socialization, provide consistent discipline, and offer a range of developmentally appropriate activities that support each child's unique learning style.

4

Fostering Coalitions & Networks

- Foster collaboration between city planners, transportation and housing authorities, law enforcement, business leaders, funders, and health and education service providers in the development of neighborhoods and services that promote young children's health and well-being.
- Foster partnerships that increase young children's access to positive male role models, including fathers and father figures. Partner with community organizations and networks to involve boys and young men in activities promoting interpersonal respect and cooperation.

5

Changing Organizational Practices

- Incorporate violence screening and assessment tools into existing healthcare protocols and training and promote their use to increase identification and intervention with pregnant women, caregivers, and young children who are at risk of violence.
- Contact television stations, advertising sponsors, and other media outlets, encouraging them to incorporate less violent and inappropriate content in children and family programming.

6

Influencing Policy & Legislation

- Advocate for a refundable per-child tax credit for all families that does not change if parents enter the workforce and for the provision of non-cash benefits such as childcare subsidies and housing and transportation vouchers to low-income families with young children.
- Advocate for policies that support family mental health, including expanding health insurance coverage to include infant and parental mental health and providing adequate training to ensure quality services and programs.



Early Childhood Development and Violence Prevention: Identified Risk and Resiliency Factors

| | RISK | RESILIENCY |
|---|---|--|
| COMMUNITY AND STRUCTURAL FACTORS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Poverty & economic disparity ■ Bias & discrimination ■ Community deterioration ■ Media violence ■ Access to firearms ■ Gender socialization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Community networks & leadership ■ Financial resources ■ Empowerment & decision-making avenues ■ Community facilities ■ Health, education, & social service systems |
| INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY FACTORS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Prenatal risk, toxins, & poor nutrition ■ Child abuse & neglect ■ Negative family dynamics ■ Alcohol & other drug abuse ■ Witnessing violence ■ Mental illness ■ Illiteracy & poor academic achievement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Good physical & mental health ■ Positive attachments & relationships ■ Emotional competence ■ Cognitive competence ■ Self-esteem |

Key 2: **Risk and resiliency factors must be addressed**

Individuals, families, and communities have an enormous capacity to contribute to the resolution of the challenges they face, including violence. Successful violence prevention requires the strengthening of resiliency factors that protect and support children, families, and communities, as well as the reduction of risk factors that threaten their well-being.

Key 3: **Violence prevention requires an integrated strategy for action**

Successful violence prevention integrates an understanding of the complex issues, policies, and systems that affect children, families, and communities into an action plan that strategically coordinates, supports, and strengthens multiple efforts.

Recommendations for integrated action:

- 1) Provide families with services and supports to foster health and empowerment.
- 2) Recognize poverty as a significant risk factor and take steps to minimize its impact.
- 3) Prevent and reduce the impact of abuse, neglect, and witnessing violence.
- 4) Increase wellness opportunities and access to quality healthcare for children and families.
- 5) Promote mental health and meet the mental health needs of all family members.
- 6) Reduce substance abuse among caregivers and pregnant women and their partners.
- 7) Provide affordable, available, and high-quality early care and education.
- 8) Improve the ability of families, communities, and schools to prepare children for school.
- 9) Implement measures to reduce young children's access to guns.
- 10) Reduce the impact of media violence on young children.
- 11) Intervene in early bullying behavior and address underlying causes.
- 12) Increase children's opportunities for appropriate play and creative exploration.
- 13) Enhance community connections, resources, and access to information and decision-making.
- 14) Increase local coordination of services and resources for families and their children.
- 15) Ensure that violence prevention efforts for young children are driven by effective strategy.

The evidence is overwhelming: barriers to positive, healthy early childhood development and early experiences of violence inversely affect children in ways that persist far beyond childhood, impacting brain development, academic achievement, relationships, and the risk of being involved in violence. It is critically important to

foster healthy development and prevent violence from occurring by reducing risks and fostering resiliency, working collaboratively, and comprehensively addressing underlying issues. Ensuring that young children have the supports and opportunities they need and deserve is a priority that requires great commitment. It is up to every one of us to take action — to take the first steps toward healthy child development and violence prevention.





FIRST STEPS

Partner Organizations

Prevention Institute promotes and develops comprehensive prevention solutions. The Institute is a nonprofit organization that develops methods and strategy to strengthen prevention efforts *before* the onset of a problem. As a national focal point for prevention, the Institute develops and researches effective models and provides strategy consultation, community tools, technical assistance, and training to improve prevention practice. The Institute works with communities, organizations, and government (local, state, and federal) agencies on preventive approaches to problems such as violence, traffic crashes, and chronic disease. All efforts are aimed at changing systems in order to achieve the broadest and most sustained impact. For more information, visit www.preventioninstitute.org.

Action Alliance for Children (AAC) exists to inform, educate, and persuade a statewide constituency of people who work with and on behalf of children by providing the most reliable information on current issues, trends, and public policies that affect children and families in California. AAC is a resource for and facilitates dialogue among diverse community groups, including policy makers, media, children's service providers and advocates, educators, and parents. AAC publishes the award-winning, bimonthly newsmagazine, the *Children's Advocate*, with a readership of more than 30,000. In addition, AAC has initiated the *Building Communication Project*, creating opportunities for children's organizations to interact with the *Children's Advocate* and to strengthen the growing movement for children and families. For more information, visit www.4children.org.

Fight Crime: Invest in Kids California is the state office of a national organization composed of over 1,500 sheriffs, police chiefs, district attorneys, and crime survivors. Fight Crime: Invest in Kids *California* believes that giving children the right start in life through measures such as quality, affordable child care and after-school programs is crucial in preventing and reducing juvenile delinquency and violence. Fight Crime: Invest in Kids *California* compiles and publicizes research on the effects of children's programs on crime prevention. The California State Sheriffs Association, California Police Chiefs Association, California Peace Officers Association, California District Attorneys Association, and hundreds of law enforcement professionals have endorsed Fight Crime: Invest in Kids *California's* prevention plan. For more information, visit www.fightcrime.org.



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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This report, as well as a **FIRST STEPS GUIDE**, is available at:
www.preventioninstitute.org/firststeps.html and www.4children.org

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