

WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?



by Dan Fox, President Family and Children's Place

For several days the nation has been transfixed

on Happy Valley over reports of numerous counts of sexual abuse at the hands of a coach at Penn State University. Even more disturbing, there may have been a list of people associated with the university who let it happen and chose to do nothing. In the wake of these allegations the issue of child sexual abuse is thrust into the public spotlight. How we choose to engage it at this moment can change the course of how society values prevention and treatment for child victims. The first question we must ask ourselves is "What about the children?"

Instincts, for many of us, drive us to demand justice and to join in the condemnation of the people responsible. This instinct is not wrong—on the contrary, it is quite human. We do not, however, want the race to punish overshadow the race to heal these children. Regardless of the collective anger we may feel as a result of the actions—or more importantly the inactions—of certain Penn State staff, our primary objective should be to see to it that all child victims receive proper counseling and treatment. We must work diligently to restore the sense of innocence and self worth in those that may have been trapped in the most heinous of circumstances, through no fault of their own.

We at Family and Children's Place know all too well how prevalent sexual abuse is within our community. Nationally, **one in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused by the age of eighteen.** Such numbers may come as a shock, in part because as a society we have not come to terms with the magnitude of the issue. This particular case should not be viewed as an isolated occurrence. Studies would indicate that what has been reported at Penn State is, unfortunately, a classic case of sexual abuse. More often than not an abuser has multiple victims. In the vast majority of the cases the person responsible is someone close to the victim and his/her family. Most troubling, it is not uncommon that third parties make an effort to protect and even conceal those responsible. Our Child Advocacy Center sees over 1,100 new cases of child sexual abuse each year, representing a small fraction of victims in the area that need our help. The effort is collaborative, involving police, Child Protective Services, the Commonwealth Attorney, medical services and mental health experts. The need for such comprehensive programming to prevent abuse, stop abuse, and help children and families recover is greater than ever. State and federal governments, however, continue to cut funding for programs that are critical to the safety and the health of our children. Providing proper resources for healing and treatment—resources these children deserve—is not a luxury, but a necessity that every community should be equipped with.

The news, social media outlets, even the coffee shop conversations have submitted for consideration what a black eye this is for those involved and the institution. The principal tragedy, far and above, is the abused children. We cannot and should not equate the significance of dismantling a revered athletic program to the crime that allegedly took place. There is no comparison. Any attempt to do so could encourage victims to feel somehow responsible, adding to the unspeakable trauma these children may already be experiencing. Without proper intervention and treatment, like those offered at Family and Children's Place, the guilt and shame associated with sexual abuse can have devastating results as the child enters adolescence and adulthood; higher risk of depression, substance abuse and suicide, more likely to commit violent crimes and even become abusers themselves.



Family & Children's Place

Building brighter futures.

What has to change to end child sexual abuse, or at least put a major dent in it? First, our dialogue must match the scope of the problem. Choosing not to talk about it and not making it a central focus in matters related to family and children is no longer acceptable. To be clear, sexual abuse is not comfortable or pleasant to talk about. The discomfort, however, pails in comparison to the trauma experienced by millions of victims—fed by our silence and inaction. The children are often too scared or too traumatized to speak. We must be willing to lend our voices on their behalf. It is the responsibility of adults to protect children, not the responsibility of children to protect themselves.

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I challenge Kentuckiana to make a commitment that we will stand together and strive to end child sexual abuse. We can work to ensure our community does everything possible to prevent these tragedies from occurring. We can also provide proper intervention and treatment services should sexual abuse take place. We can help those traumatized by sexual abuse begin to heal. Join in this conversation to make the protection of our children a priority.

If you would like to learn more about how you can help prevent and stop abuse, visit our website at www.familyandchildrensplace.org to learn about the Darkness to Light program, a national training initiative teaches people to recognize the signs of child sexual abuse and work to prevent it. Upcoming training sessions will be posted as they are scheduled, and we encourage you to take part. If you are aware of abuse currently taking place, do not wait. Contact the Louisville Child Abuse Hotline at 595-4550.

Family and Children's Place serves approximately 6,500 children and families annually, throughout Kentuckiana. The agency's mission is to strengthen the community through healing the trauma of abuse, violence and neglect and promoting safe, healthy and stable families through research-based services. For more information about Family and Children's Place, visit www.familyandchildrensplace.org or call 502.893.3900.

From the Publisher,

I recently attended the eighth annual Building Brighter Futures Breakfast in an effort to learn more about Family and Children's Place and the work that they do to prevent and stop child abuse in our community. I was deeply moved by the keynote address from Imperium Health CEO Gary Thompson. Thompson, a long-time volunteer and advocate of Family and Children's Place, opened up about the abuse that he endured as a child at the hands of his father.

The event also included plans for a new Child Advocacy Center, set to break ground this winter. The Humana Foundation has pledged a \$500,000 "Topping Off" Grant toward the agency's capital campaign to construct the new center. The grant challenge is contingent on the Family and Children's Place raising the remaining \$1 million balance needed to complete its campaign by December 31st. To donate, www.familyandchildrensplace.org/donate-now-capital-campaign/