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Blaine County OSU Extension Service, 212 N Weigle, Watonga, OK 73772 580.623.5195

Email: blaineco@dasnr.okstate.edu

Child Abuse Continues to Affect Oklahoma Families

Child abuse continues to be a problem in Oklahoma and the United States. Children all over the nation suffer every day from physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect.

While many people believe the main forms of child abuse are physical and sexual, neglect is by far the most commonly confirmed form of child abuse in the United States, said Debbie Richardson, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service child development specialist.

"Neglect is the failure of a parent or caretaker to provide for a child's basic needs and care in an age-appropriate manner. This includes necessary food, clothing or shelter, protection and supervision, medical care, education, failure to provide emotional care, permitting the child to use alcohol or other drugs, or abandonment," Richardson said. "While neglect is often an act of omission, it can be just as harmful as intentional physical maltreatment."

Between 1998 and 2002 in Oklahoma, an average 14,500 cases of child abuse or neglect per year were confirmed. More than 75 percent were cases of neglect. In addition, more than 50 percent involved children under the age of six. An average of 43 children died each year due to maltreatment and more than half were infants.

"Unfortunately, child abuse in the form of neglect receives significantly less attention than other forms of abuse," she said. "This may be in part due to neglect being more difficult to identify. Child abuse in all forms knows no boundaries. Children from all communities, races, ethnicity and socioeconomic backgrounds are affected by abuse and neglect."

Some signs of neglect include a child who has poor school attendance, begs or steals food or money, lacks medical or dental care or other interventions for disease or injury, has poor hygiene or severe body odor, lacks sufficient clothing for the weather, has taken on adult responsibilities for the family, or is lethargic or constantly tired.

"Obviously these situations don't always mean a child is being neglected. Sometimes cultural values, the standards of care in the community and poverty may be contributing factors," Richardson said. "This would indicate the family is in need of information or assistance. However, when a family fails to use information and resources, and the child's health or safety is at risk, then child welfare intervention may be required."

Programs that reduce the likelihood of neglect are those that help parents learn how to nurture and care for their child. Programs include education and support to enhance child development, parenting skills and positive parent-child interaction, home safety, access to medical care and to reduce isolation. Programs that provide parent education through home visitation and support groups for parents help families to better care for their children. The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service provides services through Healthy Families programs in Canadian, Delaware and Texas counties. Similar services are provided by numerous other agencies across the state. The Cooperative Extension Service also provides other parent education programs and resource information in various counties.

