



The Children's Trust

OF SOUTH CAROLINA

**Testimony of Sue Williams, Chief Executive Officer
Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children
September 20, 2011**

Senator Fair, Representative Brady and all members of the committee, thank you for letting the public provide comments on the status of children through these statewide field hearings. This is a tremendous opportunity to hear directly about the families who are struggling across our state, and to learn of the programs designed to help them.

I am Sue Williams, chief executive officer for the Children's Trust of South Carolina. The Children's Trust works with more than 40 organizations in our state network all dedicated to the prevention of child abuse, neglect and unintentional injuries. Our work supports statewide educational trainings, grant support for proven prevention programs and leading Safe Kids South Carolina. On behalf of our program, Safe Kids South Carolina, we applaud the work of this committee and specifically that of Senator Hutto for passage of Chandler's Law in 2010. The measure ensures that more children and youth are safe while operating all-terrain vehicles.

Given the complexity of the issues confronting the committee, I would like to spend a few moments addressing the lifelong impact of toxic stress on children. By having a concentrated focus on the prevention of traumatic childhood experiences we could avoid many other challenges and create some positives including a strengthened educational performance, stronger health outcomes and decreased involvement in other state agencies including child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

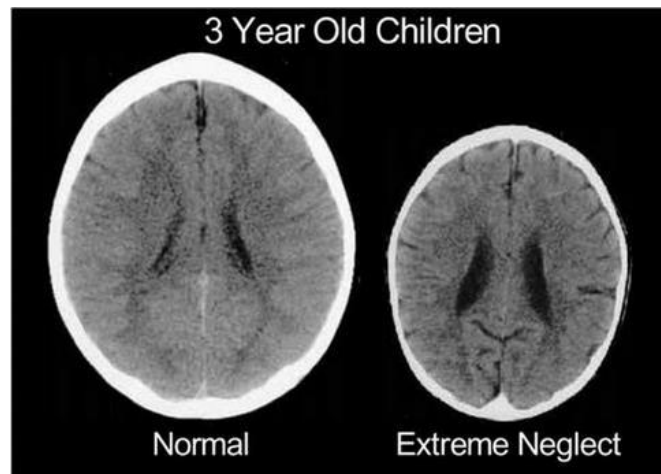
Nearly 15 years ago, the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES) was released featuring longitudinal impact studies of 17,000 individuals insured through Kaiser Permanente. Researchers showed childhood exposure to toxic stress—including divorce, physical or emotional abuse, a family confronting mental illness or addictions — had a direct correlation to later adult functioning. Results are shocking: compared to their peers, individuals with exposure to four or more such stressors were more likely to smoke, abuse alcohol and drugs, and engage in criminal and sexual behavior. Additionally, cancer rates and heart disease doubled. Add to this the proven perpetuation of the abuse cycle by adults in their own parenting — and it is not difficult to see how our society suffers as a whole.

The image below displays the impact of toxic stress in a better fashion. These are two brain scans of two separate three year old children. The one on the left is progressing at the normal stages of development. The one on the right, however, is from a victim of extreme neglect. Prolonged exposure to toxic stress as children has a profound impact and can

hinder their social, emotional and cognitive development. This may further lead to individuals to engage in high-risk behaviors and have physical and mental health challenges. All of these at a greater cost to the public.

With more than a 1/3 of all confirmed child maltreatment occurring before the age of three, it is critical we have a greater concentration on proven prevention programs that focus on this and families in which they live.

More than 36,000 children in South Carolina were reported as abused or neglected last year. Of the more than 12,500 children confirmed as abused, 34 percent were age three or younger. More than 8,300 children will enter foster care at some point during the year and more than 4,000 thousand are in care on any given day. Prevent Child Abuse America estimates the combined direct and indirect costs of child maltreatment to exceed \$103 billion nationally each year. For South Carolina, this cost may exceed more than \$1 billion annually.



The great opportunity before us is we know what works: high quality early education and parenting programs. Advances in programs through continuous quality improvement have brought forth a new integration of the academic science in how programs are delivered, monitored and evaluated. **Today, we are clearly able to document that the soundest investments—with the greatest return on investment—are with high quality early education and parenting programs.** This includes proven, evidence base voluntary home visiting programs, accessible child care integrating core components of child development and access to early-education curriculum for all low-income children in the state.

I would also like to point to legislation introduced late in the 2011 session, H.B. 4317, the Home Visiting Accountability Act, which will help ensure the proper state investments are directed to programs that work and are geared to those most in need.

Appropriate investments in these areas shift the practices of the state from a reactionary one toward a preventive approach. This will allow the strengthening of parents and families in approaches proven by science and accepted by the community. This is the most cost-effective and compassionate way of promoting strong families and safe children giving all of us safe communities.

We ask, as the General Assembly considers options for enhancing the services available for children and families, please remember that effective community based services must be just that—community based. There should be a strong community integration and collaboration between services to ensure all the various needs of the family are met.

Further, I urge the committee to look at all policies—whether they are child specific or not—and ask, “how does this help children and families?”

The Children’s Trust has adopted the Five Protective Factors framework to assist in this approach. Developed by The Center for the Study of Social Policy these include:

- **Parental Resilience:** *the ability to manage and bounce back from all types of challenges that emerge in every family’s life. It means finding ways to solve problems, building and sustaining trusting relationships including relationships with your own child and knowing how to seek help when necessary.*
- **Social Connections:** *friends, family members, neighbors and community members provide emotional support, help solve problems, offer parenting advice and provide concrete assistance to parents.*
- **Concrete Support in Times of Need:** *meeting basic economic needs like food, shelter, clothing and health care is essential for families to thrive. When families encounter a crisis such as domestic violence, mental illness or substance abuse, adequate services and supports need to be in place to provide stability, treatment and help for family to get through the crisis.*
- **Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development:** *Accurate information about child development and appropriate expectations for children’s behavior at every age help parents see their children in a positive light and promote healthy development.*
- **Social and Emotional Competence of Children:** *a child’s ability to positively interact with others, self-regulate their behavior and effectively communicate their feelings has a positive impact on their relationships with family, other adults and peers. Challenging behaviors or delayed development create extra stress for families, so early identification and assistance for both parents and children can head off negative results and keep development on track.*

As the committee continues its work in preparation for the 2012 legislative session, remember these truths and how they may be integrated toward the development of all child policy proposals.

The Children’s Trust applauds the work of the committee and looks forward to continuing to serve as a resource in order to ensure all children have a safe and stable home.

Yours in service,

Sue Williams
Chief Executive Officer