

Making the Case: *Why Prevention Matters*

Across the nation there has been great progress in work to improve the health and well-being of children. But the turbulent economy and the budget cutting that has come with it threaten to derail efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect at a moment when it is needed most. If the work that has done so much for children is to continue and to grow, it is important to show that it yields benefits on many levels—for children, their families, and their communities. Consistent decisions to support for the needs of children are at the heart of a bright future. The information offered in the “Why Prevention Matters” series will help those working so hard to improve the lives of our youngest citizens.

Prevention Creates the Future by Transforming Culture

- Dr. Jeff Linkenbach

Author’s note: My view of preventing child abuse and neglect is shaped by what I term the Science of the Positive—a framework which seeks to transform cultures by integrating spirit, science, and action. I believe positive solutions exist in every community, but are often hidden. When this hidden goodness is revealed in a way that does not simply change culture, but transforms it, safer, healthier communities emerge.

What follows is a description of how this process works and how it can lead to a culture in which child abuse and neglect are not only unacceptable, but also one where prioritizing the needs of children is the key to positively transforming society.

Prevention Creates the Future

The best way to prepare for the future is to create it. Prevention is the process of proactively cultivating positive cultures, leading to a better future for children and their families. To create that future we must challenge some of the ways that we view, discuss and fund prevention. For example, while intervention policies and ways to stop incidents of child abuse and neglect are critical, such policies are by definition reactive. Prevention must move ‘upstream’ from the problem and address norms in the culture. This is where we must combine the ‘spirit’ of being proactive with prevention science to drive best practices.

Prevention Begins in the Community

Everyone who is part of a community is an active participant in creating that community’s culture. Communities, by their nature, want the best for their children, and citizens are driven by a strong sense of doing what is good. But there is often a drumbeat of negative conversation about parents and young people that hides this sense of goodness. The culture of a community can in-part be understood by the conversations that members have about themselves. It is critical that our community’s conversations reflect strong norms of prioritizing the needs of children. We must align our talk with our values.

The Science of the Positive™

When cultures of health and safety are transformed in positive ways, one result will be prevention of child abuse and neglect. The Science of the Positive is an important framework for bringing about this transformation by aligning the three core domains of spirit, science, and action.

- Spirit refers to meaning, essence, and values.
We all share a common spirit of care and concern for the wellbeing of children.
- Science refers to understanding, investigation, and knowledge. Science guides discovery.
- Action refers to behaviors, practices, and habits. Best practices are actions guided by science.

Transformation occurs through the alignment of spirit followed by use of science to drive actions that improve conditions for children. Spirit first, then Science drives Actions.

Transformation versus Change

It is not enough to simply change behaviors that already exist. For prevention of child abuse and neglect, behaviors that damage children have to be stopped before they begin. In other words, change is often a temporary solution, the result, perhaps, of throwing money at a problem. When the money stops the problem returns. Change works within an existing framework and simply supports existing perceptions and definitions.

Transformation, however, involves a process of shifting frameworks based upon careful consideration and then alteration of the underlying assumptions of those frameworks. It includes structural changes in the way people think about an issue and in the structures of society. The process of transforming cultural norms involves critical reflection in order to create a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thoughts, feelings and actions. This is how we begin to completely shift norms.

An effective approach to prevention of child abuse and neglect must address both change and transformation. Change is necessary because abuse and neglect exist and the factors that cause them must be altered. Prevention is the goal because at its best, abuse and neglect will not exist, and when that happens, transformation will have taken place.

How to Bring about Transformation

Many people do not recognize the factors in their community that are essential in protecting children from abuse and neglect. These misperceptions are a problem because cultural norms exert a tremendous influence on conversations, attitudes, and the way people govern themselves.

Transformation of culture involves bringing about a clear view of prevention factors—factors that already exist and need to be expanded. For example, most lawmakers and a majority of the public want to pass laws that increase support for early education. Standing in the way are the outspoken statements of special interest groups that skew the debate. The result is legislation that is less than effective in transforming antiquated laws into those that are aligned with deeper values of concern for children and the desire to do what is best for them.

The transformation of culture involves transforming peoples' views, mental structures, beliefs, conversations, and assumptions in ways that uncover the goodness and solutions in the community, leading to a healthy future. It's not magic—it's intentional and planned.

Prevention Matters Because Children Matter

America needs leaders who recognize the difference between transformation and change and act boldly to transform culture in a positive way. This means creating conditions through health and safety legislation that allow children and their communities to thrive. Prevention of child abuse and neglect represents a transformation of culture, one in which families are strong and children thrive because they feel safe, stable, and nurtured.

This vision of safer communities, healthier people and a more democratic society is the hope and dream of America. The factors that are needed to accomplish this vision may be hidden, but they already exist and they can be revealed. When they are, we will find that prevention is at the core of our values.

About the Author

Dr. Jeff Linkenbach is the Director of the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University. His research and consulting always seek to challenge the traditionally negative and typically ineffective ways that institutions approach issues associated with health—instead he stimulates a dialogue about how we can utilize “the Science of the Positive” as a framework for approaching all social health issues. Jeff lives in Bozeman, Montana with his wife Cindy and his two children who bring joy and meaning to his work and life. Visit his website at www.mostofus.org

Prevention Creates the Future by Transforming Culture

Author: Dr. Jeff Linkenbach, Director of the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University

Q. Why Does Prevention Matter?

A. Prevention matters because it transforms culture. It is only through a process of transformation that we actually get ‘deep enough’ to shift the underlying structures of our assumptions. Our shared assumptions are the taproot of everything else that happens in society and how we treat children. It is from our assumptions that we form perceptions, frameworks, beliefs, feelings and actions. Effective prevention is a pro-active process that challenges and transforms assumptions and this is “Why Prevention Matters”.

Q. How Is Transformation Different from Change?

A. Change is a process that works within a current paradigm or framework. Change stays within the boundaries of the current paradigm and builds on or adds to this existing view. It utilizes the same language, stories and solutions to problems. Change is critical and easier to quantify and scientifically measure than transformation. Transformation is different because it creates a new form, and impacts underlying structures. This new form results in a shift of assumptions, worldviews, language and culture. Transformation is an entirely different framework. Prevention matters because it transforms culture and makes change possible and sustainable. We need both—change and transformation.

Q. Why is Transformation More Difficult than Change?

A. At the heart of transformation is the challenge of facing ourselves and reinventing individual and cultural assumptions. As a society, we have difficulty seeing how we participate in constructing the norms that surround us. This is why transformation is more difficult than change—but it is also why we have hope to change. Since we co-created the norms and frameworks that we live in, we can also alter them. That means that while we are shaped by our environments and social context—we can also act upon and transform them. In essence, we are both the painters and the paintings.

Q. Is Transformation of Culture Really Possible?

A. Transformation is happening all the time and is what defines us as humans and gives us hope as a society. America is built upon intentional transformation from the

original colonists transforming taxation and government to more recent social and health movements such as social justice, women’s suffrage and tobacco prevention. Culture is constantly alive and ready for transformation into more positive possibilities. The Science of the Positive joins with this readiness by aligning spirit, science and action.

Q. How Does the Science of the Positive View Prevention?

A. According to the Science of the Positive prevention is a process of transforming cultures. Accordingly, cultural transformation involves the process of ‘praxis’ which engages people in a process of critical reflection, critical dialogue and actions. This process involves examination of 7 Core Principles that then translate into actions that make a difference. People must be engaged in a process of examining the norms that matter to them.

Q. Doesn’t Prevention Already Have Frameworks?

A. The prevention field has many frameworks and, so too does the public when it comes to preventing child maltreatment. A framework, like the development of any worldview is an on-going iterative process—not a one-time event. This dynamic is precisely why a transformative learning process is needed. Conducting research into common frames and then marketing those frames to different audiences is important, but it is only one part of an on-going process of engaging critical reflection and dialogue regarding assumptions we all hold about the wellbeing of children. Cultural transformation is the prevention process-in-action and is needed to ensure that this dialogue about challenging policies and practices is effective.

Q. What is the Science of the Positive™?

A. The Science of the Positive is a transformative theory to improve community health and safety cultures. It works by integrating the three domains of Spirit, Science and Action to achieve lasting results. It is based upon 7 Core Principles that translate into 7 Key Steps. The Science of the Positive transforms culture by creating conditions for critically examining core assumptions, perceptions, beliefs and actions. These are integrated through a process of aligning core principles. The Science of the Positive has had dramatic impacts on a variety of health and safety issues.

Q. How Quickly Can We Transform Culture?

A. Cultural transformation is not a quick fix change. Culturally endorsed values are deeply seated and shifting these assumptions takes years. Any short-term view of “using culture” as a “strategy” to quickly change behaviors must be dissolved against the reality of the work and dedication that is involved. When we talk about transformation of culture we are not talking about a media campaign, toolkit or drive through therapy. Transformation requires dedicated work.

Q. What Makes People Actually Want to Take Action? How Do We Do That?

A. People are inherently good and want to participate in making the world a better place. The problem is that with a focus on negativity and fear, we often withdraw and engage in conversations and voting that is against our heart-felt desire. People want to take action when they feel hopeful and realize that they can make a positive difference. By exposing positive norms and ways for people to engage in these norms and programs more and more people will want to participate in a shared solution. This is the essence of all positive social movements—connecting to the positive values that already exist and giving people clear directives for how they can become involved. The key is to make it visible—because the untold goodness often remains hidden.

Q. Is Funding Prevention More Important Than Funding Intervention?

A. Prevention and intervention are two sides of the same coin. Prevention is proactive and intervention is reactive. They both have different aims that work together to promote cultures that care and heal. Proactive-prevention funding is long-term oriented and designed to create conditions that support families and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. However, when people fall through our system—interventions to reduce harm and restore broken lives are needed. Currently our culture tends to react with our funding and priorities. This pendulum must swing toward the preventative side because interventions are not designed to transform culture. At this time it is critical that we increase funding and attention to proactive prevention.

Q. Why Do We Tend to Misperceive the Goodness in our Communities?

A. Misperceptions of positive norms is pervasive due to a number of cultural factors and why we need a “Science of the Positive.” Research demonstrates that in spite of serious problems, an overall goodness and protection prevails in our society. However, due to a hyper-focus on negative issues through sensationalized media, public conversations and the focused attention of prevention advocates—misperceptions

of these positive, protective norms perpetuate. This environment creates what I call ‘cultural cataracts’ – dark, negatively skewed views of our young people, families and communities.

Q. What Is the One Thing We Should Focus on to Reduce Child Abuse?

A. Prevention science demonstrates that no single solution exists to reduce child abuse and neglect. Instead, a comprehensive approach of strategies must be employed to create safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments. Strategies must include policies, enforcement, media communications, intervention, education and skill training to give examples. The “one thing” that we should focus on to reduce child abuse is communicating cultural norms that make the well-being of children the benchmark for the health of our society.

Q. Can't We Stop Child Abuse by Locking Up the Perpetrators Forever?

A. Reactive strategies like arresting and locking up perpetrators will not work to create a healthier culture or future for children. Clearly enforcement remains very important, yet proactive strategies are needed to break the cycles of abuse. Proactive strategies are designed to prevent the abuse from happening in the first place. It is here where we must increase funding and attention in order to cultivate positive cultures characterized by protective norms.

Q. Doesn't Taking a Positive Approach Just Hide the Pain and Suffering of Child Abuse?

A. Effective positive approaches don't deny or hide the pain and suffering associated with child abuse. It is critical to acknowledge the reality of the hurt and damage caused by child abuse and at the same time we must instill hope that we can overcome these problems. The Science of the Positive framework stresses both concern and hope as a balanced approach to serious issues like child abuse. Growing positive norms is the best strategy for reducing harmful ones. Prevention is about creating conditions that stop problems before they start.

Q. Aren't We Powerless to Move Forward until More People Realize the Devastating Impacts of Child Abuse?

A. This is the classic question of “aren't we just in denial?” The answer is “no.” Child abuse prevention has made tremendous progress in the past few decades and this momentum must continue. Understanding the negative impacts of child abuse is important—but so too is increasing the widespread understanding of protective solutions. Just focusing on the devastating impacts will do little to further advance child abuse prevention in a general public that goes numb to bombardment of health terrorism advertising. Our research demonstrates that people are hungry for solutions and positive ways to engage—not just focus on the problem. This is how we can turn social concern into social action.



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