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When Parents Are Desperate: Neighbors Can Mean the Difference Between Life and Death for a Baby

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Three infants in New York City have died in the past three months after being thrown out of windows, allegedly by their mothers. Rizwan died in August, 2015; a newborn baby girl (unnamed) in September 2015, and six-month-old Janilah died yesterday. For those of us who dedicate our lives to protecting children, it makes you question whether or not we are doing enough to reach parents who are at the end of their rope.

Obviously, we are not.

We all must get involved if we think a child is at risk. Back in the 1990s, I was involved in a “Neighbors Helping Neighbors” campaign. Its goal was to encourage citizens in the Bronx to reach out to those who lived nearby if they suspected they were stressed, struggling and in danger of harming their children. By offering support and becoming familiar with available resources, we hoped child abuse and neglect would be prevented. We need to encourage this type of involvement now.

Many adults are still reluctant to report their suspicions when they think a child may be at risk. How many times do we hear on the news, “I knew something was wrong, but I never thought she’d hurt the baby,” or, “They are always fighting in that house, but you are afraid to get involved, don’t know if they could turn on you.”

So, children are left in danger. I am encouraging you to take action. When a child is brought to the attention of the authorities, the children and their parents can get the help that they need to prevent abuse and strengthen their family. It can mean the difference between life and death for newborns and children under the age of four, when most fatalities occur.

Please learn the basic steps to help a baby or child at risk.

First of all, if you see a child being abused, or hear a child screaming in pain, call 911. If you have suspicions that a child is at risk, every state has a hotline that you can call to make a report. They will ask for your name and number, but you can choose to remain anonymous. Even if you are not certain about all the specifics, make the call. It's then up to the investigators to follow through. The National Child Abuse Hot-line is 1-800-4 A CHILD or 1-800-422-4253.

There are also resources that could help desperate parents: Safe Havens, Crisis Nurseries and Parent Crisis Helplines.

Every state in the United States, has a law that allows an unharmed child to be relinquished to the proper authorities, no questions asked. It's called the "Infant Safe Haven Law" It was first enacted in Texas, in 1999. It was developed as an incentive for mothers in crisis to safely give up their child to designated locations where the babies are protected. The laws generally allow the parent to remain anonymous and to be shielded from prosecution for abandonment or neglect in exchange for bringing the baby to a safe haven. You can access the laws for each state through the Child Welfare Information Gateway. The locations that are designated Safe Havens vary by state, but they include: fire stations, police stations, hospitals, emergency medical provider by responding to a 911 call or a church. These providers then contact child protective services to let them know the infant has been relinquished.

Crisis Nurseries are another option for parents at their wits end, or, are in an emergency situation whereby they can't care for their child(ren). These programs were developed to prevent child abuse and neglect. Most offer free 24/7 crisis nursery care for children up to age 12, when parents who are over-stressed, need a break, or have an emergency arise. Usually, you can leave a child for up to 72 hours at a time. The services vary, but at most programs, the children can receive medical services, developmental screening and assessment, age appropriate recreational play, education, including transportation to local schools and crisis counseling for parents. The staff at these programs work with the parent(s) to develop a safety plan for the children's return to home.

A partial list of crisis nurseries can be found at this link. From the research I could find, it appears that 47 states have a total of 175 programs that are funded through federal funding. The best way to identify programs in your area is to google "crisis nursery" along with the name of your state.

Parent Crisis Helplines can help too. First, they can put the parent in touch with one of the crisis nurseries or explain the Safe Haven law, if it applies. They can also provide a supportive outlet for a stressed out parent to discuss the difficulties that they are having in parenting their children. The counselors range from trained volunteers to paid professional staff. Many operate 24 hours a day and offer services in several languages too. The American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress <http://www.aaets.org/crisishotline.htm> offers a nationwide crisis helpline for each state. These hotlines offer counseling services for issues such as parental crisis, suicide prevention or domestic violence.

In New York, I regularly refer parents to the Prevent Child Abuse New York's Parent Helpline at 1-800-Children, a confidential helpline where parents can get information and referrals to places in their community that can help.

So, we will never know if these services would have helped the parents and babies that I referenced earlier, but they could help others. Part of the problem is that parents who need these services, don't know about them. There was very little funding available to advertise Safe Haven or Crisis Nursery availability.

Please forward this blog to parents you know. You may be helping a desperate parent do the right thing when they are under too much stress. You may also be saving a child's life.

For more information on keeping your child safe visit nyspcc.org.