

All can help to end child abuse

By Lesley Kubik

CAJA of Marshall County

By the time you finish reading this article, more than 30 cases of child abuse will have been reported to authorities nationwide. By the end of today, that number will swell past 9,000. And four of those children will die at the hands of their abuser. All in a single day.

When we take stock of these sobering statistics during April – National Child Abuse Prevention Month – it's easy to be overwhelmed and to ask yourself, "What can I possibly do to make a difference?"

The answer is, you can do a lot. Everybody can play a role in preventing child abuse and neglect by becoming advocates for children.

For some of us, that advocacy comes in a formal role. Teachers, child care workers, health care providers and others who come into daily contact with children can be vigilant for signs of abuse and neglect. Their actions to report suspected abuse or to offer extra time and attention to fragile children can do more than make a difference. It can save lives.



CAJA (court-appointed juvenile advocate) volunteers stand up for abused and neglected children, giving them a voice in an overburdened child welfare system that is hard-pressed to meet their individual needs. A CAJA volunteer's intense advocacy can break the cycle of abuse and neglect.

Children with CAJA volunteers find safe, permanent homes more quickly, are half as likely to re-enter the foster care system, and do better in school. That's making a profound difference in the lives of hundreds of thousands of abused and neglected children across the country – many right here in Alabama. But there are far too many children who are left to fend for themselves.

CAJA of Marshall County is one of almost 1,000 CAJA/CASA programs across the country committed to more than doubling our corps of volunteers by 2020 so that every child who needs a CAJA volunteer has one. Our next volunteer training starts on April 28th.

CAJA volunteers are people just like you – teachers, businesspeople, retirees, grandparents who are:

- Willing to participate in an in-depth training program
- Strong communicators
- Willing to commit to at least one year of service
- Able to pass a criminal and Child Protective Services background check
- Over age 21

Not everyone can be a CAJA volunteer, but everyone can be an advocate. Here are some steps you can take to make our community safer for our children.

- Call the National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-4ACHILD (800-422-4453) or Marshall County DHR at 888-658-5132 if you suspect a child is being abused or neglected. You can report your suspicions confidentially.

- Donate or volunteer for a social service agency that helps children who have been abused or neglected, such as CAJA of Marshall County or the Marshall County Child Advocacy Center.

- Educate yourself – and others – about the devastating toll that abuse and neglect take on children and our society as a whole.

Your advocacy for children will not only help end child abuse, it will improve our community for everyone who lives here. Children who are abused and do not get the support they need to heal are

more likely than other kids to drop out of school, end up homeless, turn to crime, and rely as adults on social welfare programs. When we work together to protect vulnerable children, it saves lives while also saving tax dollars.

We all have a role to play. What will yours be?

Lesley Kubik is the Executive Director at CAJA of Marshall County. Find out more at www.cajofmarshall.org.