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October is Child Abuse Prevention Month

By Sarah Sobanski

As we make our way through October, we recognize the 25th annual Child Abuse Prevention Month. We recognize that in a perfect world, every child would have a safe, loving home and family, who could also afford to put food on the table every night.

Just before the end of September, income results for the 2016 census were released. Stats showed that, besides Tyendinaga, almost a fifth or more children in each of the county's 14 member municipalities were living in low-income homes. In Bancroft and Wollaston that number hovered around a third.

Highland Shores Children's Aid's mission statement touches on three words: protect, care and empower. ?First and foremost, [it] will protect and care for children and youth in need in the counties of Hastings, Northumberland and Prince Edward, while at the same time empowering children and families to be all they can be through various means of educational support.?

Attending a poverty roundtable in the community last week, I heard a wonderful thought. To paraphrase, poverty isn't embarrassing or a disgrace, it's inconvenient and often an inescapable loop. The community has to come together and build supports to help lift each other out of poverty ? it's not something that is easily done alone.

Homelessness, poverty, the inability to feed your children ? aren't things that people showboat when first introducing themselves. Many people don't want to admit they need help, more were brought up to put on a strong face and look after themselves ? even when that might be impossible. Highland Shores summarizes it best, however, ?it takes a village to keep kids safe.?

When looking for child abuse, I often think to look for bruises. But this awareness month I want to take a different approach. While looking for those children in families that need to be saved, I'm also going to look for the children in families whose families need saving.

?Many people don't realize that in 97 per cent of investigations that CASs do, children remain in the home while we work with families who may be struggling with issues such as addiction, unemployment, poverty, domestic violence or mental health challenges,? said Mark Kartusch, executive director of Highland Shores in a press release for the awareness month. According to the release, the ?purple ribbon campaign is to address the myth that calling [CAS] will lead to the separation of a child from their family. The purple ribbon campaign helps to raise awareness about how to identify child abuse or neglect, but also provides people with more insight about how a call to their [CAS] actually helps children and families.?

A 2015 release by the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies saw then Maria Harlick, planning and strategy lead for the association, discuss latest findings of the Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect. She said, ?The significant role that chronic needs plays in bringing families into contact with the child welfare system stood out for me. Over half of maltreatment related investigations (53 per cent) in Ontario in 2013 involved a primary caregiver living in socioeconomic hardship. This finding reveals that it's not urgent protection cases such as physical abuse that are primarily endangering children and youth in Ontario but ongoing chronic needs generated by poverty, mental health, and substance abuse.?

?Abuse? is a scary word. It sounds condemning. If parents and families are abusive then they should absolutely be labelled that way and children should be protected when they cannot protect themselves.

That being said, ?abuse prevention? is an umbrella that is used to identify children and families in need this month. It should almost be changed to Child Wellness Awareness Month. ?Abuse prevention? could lead to helping a family back onto their feet.

To learn the signs of child abuse or recognizing a family in need through a child, you can visit www.oacas.org/childrens-aid-child-protection/what-is-abuse/. For more on the month, or on our local CAS visit www.highlandshorescas.com.

Don't forget to wear purple on Oct. 24. Let's look out for kids this month.