

**Voices for VI Children,**  
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**Title: High-quality Early Childcare/Education Can Help Reduce Child Abuse + Neglect**

Spring inspires an honoring of young, new life. This month, our young children are celebrated during The Week of the Young Child (April 22-28). Our children's vulnerability is recognized too: April is also Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect month.

Interestingly, the two themes are closely related. Research shows there is a clear link between an 'intervention' of high-quality early childcare and education, and lowered child abuse and neglect rates in a community.

By engaging children, especially low-income children, in a system that provides early protections and support, promotes competency, and increases the likelihood of lifelong learning for the child, high-quality early childhood programs have a direct impact on reducing childhood abuse and neglect, and its resulting physical and social dangers.

High-quality, comprehensive early childcare and education centers use common strategies to provide support to vulnerable families. These strategies include built-in partnerships between teachers and families to strengthen coping skills for struggling parents and their at-risk children, referrals through the center's staff to supportive services and opportunities for families, and an objective, skilled teacher's involvement in children's lives, encouraging young children's ongoing learning skills and fostering their social and emotional competence. Children who are currently abused or at-risk of abuse benefit from the built-in protections of high-quality, comprehensive early education programs.

In the territory, instances of child abuse and neglect are rising. Child abuse and neglect affects the 344 VI children reported on in the **2006 USVI KIDS COUNT Data Book** this year. This figure represents a 28% increase over the previous year in numbers of VI children reported as abused. There are also countless other children experiencing incidents who go unreported. When children who are simply ongoing witnesses to family violence are counted, the numbers of VI children suffering the negative effects of maltreatment, and exposure to maltreatment, escalates even higher.

Why does child abuse and neglect matter -- for all members of our community? During their lifetimes, children who suffer abuse and neglect create an outsized impact on the economic and social health of their community. As children, they are at high risk of physical injuries, neurological damage, and learning delays. Going forward, they are more likely to repeat a grade in school, drop out, suffer chronic medical problems, or become juvenile offenders. As adults, they have a high likelihood of depression, drug abuse and alcoholism as well as aggressive behavior and second-generation domestic violence. In the world of work they are more often underemployed or unemployed than their peers.

Communities are reduced not only by the lost productivity that these abuse and neglect survivors represent, but also by the expenses the public incurs -- for their social intervention and remediation -- in education, justice, health and welfare support costs.

Effective solutions to reduce child abuse and neglect are important for the USVI.

Let's take ownership of the solution. We can lower the numbers of child abuse in the territory by beginning to create excellent, affordable early childcare and education for our most at-risk children. The effort starts with centers becoming licensed, then accredited, and childcare providers given opportunities to embrace excellence. It continues with government supports, backed by public "will." We need to keep moving towards effective ways to improve outcomes for our young children. High-quality childcare is one way forward.

