

# Don't give in to fearmongering and hype – this year, let's get Child Abuse Awareness Month right

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*"If only there were a Statistics Abuse Awareness Month," child advocacy group says.*

ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA, UNITED STATES, March 31, 2021 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Annual celebrations of "Child Abuse Awareness Month" have become exercises in "health terrorism" in which hype and hysteria stampede Americans into seeking "solutions" to child abuse that only make the problem worse, a national child advocacy group said Wednesday.

"The problem of child abuse is serious and real, but the solutions have been phony," said Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. "The distortion and exaggeration that typify child abuse 'awareness' campaigns promote phony solutions that make those serious, real problems worse.

"The problem is compounded by COVID-19," Wexler said. "Half a century of this sort of hype has made it easy for us to believe a false and, yes, racist, master narrative that the moment mostly white middle-class professional 'eyes' aren't on overwhelmingly poor, disproportionately nonwhite children, their parents will unleash upon them a pandemic of child abuse. The myth persists despite multiple national news organizations and scholars [challenging it over the past year](#).

"It's sadly appropriate that every year, 'Child Abuse Awareness Month' begins on April Fools' Day," Wexler said. He explained the origins of the problem:

"Back in 2003, one of the groups most responsible for fomenting hype and hysteria about child abuse came remarkably close to admitting they did just that – and that it had backfired. Rather like Dr. Frankenstein admitting he'd created a monster, in a 2003 Request for Proposals concerning how to improve their messaging, Prevent Child Abuse America wrote:

"While the establishment of a certain degree of public horror relative to the issue of child abuse and neglect was probably necessary in the early years to create public awareness of the issue, the resulting conceptual model adopted by the public has almost certainly become one of the largest barriers to advancing the issue further in terms of individual behavior change, societal solutions and policy priorities.'

"In 2020, PCAA went further. They actually [branded what they had done "health terrorism"](#) – but refused to apologize for it.

"That helps explain why every April Fools' day we are hit with a seemingly endless stream of cookie-cutter news stories and Astroturf op-ed columns (the kind written by national groups with blanks to fill in to make them sound home-grown) touting 'Child Abuse Awareness Month' – based on the bizarre premise that we are blissfully unaware of child abuse.

"Your typical Child Abuse Awareness Month news story or op-ed column follows a standard formula:

"1. Take the most horrifying case to occur in your community over the past year, the more lurid the better.

"2. Jump immediately from that story to a gigantic number which actually is only the number of 'reports' alleging any form of child maltreatment. Ignore the fact that the vast majority of those reports are false and most of the rest are nothing like the horror story. Rather, they often involve the confusion of poverty with neglect. Or...

"3. Use only the total number of cases that caseworkers guess might be true, but call them "confirmed" giving the guesses, which are simply the opinion of a worker checking a box on a form, far more credibility than they deserve. A major federal study found that workers are two to six times more likely to wrongly label an innocent family guilty than to wrongly label real child abusers innocent.

"4. Throw in huge lists of 'symptoms' or 'warning signs' that 'might' be 'signs' of child abuse – and might as easily be signs of any number of other things.

"5. Instruct us to phone the local child abuse hotline with any suspicion of anything no matter how vague and how dubious – indeed, it's claimed, we should report based on no more than a 'gut feeling' – even though 'gut feeling' often is just another word for bias – and the system already is permeated with racial and class bias.

"6. Remind us that we are welcome to call the hotline anonymously – thereby encouraging those who want to harass an ex-spouse, a neighbor or anyone else against whom they may have a grudge to go right ahead, secure in the knowledge that they'll never get caught because they can conceal their identity.

"It all comes from an ends-justify-the-means mentality that says, in effect: What's a little distortion and exaggeration in the name of a good cause? In fact, such distortion and exaggeration can do enormous harm to children.

"Hotlines wind up with more false reports and trivial cases; children are harassed and

traumatized by needless child abuse investigations – often including stripsearches as caseworkers look for bruises - and some of those children are consigned needlessly to the chaos of foster care. Caseworkers wind up even more overloaded by these false allegations, so they have even less time to find children in real danger. And this year, with COVID-19 still very much with us, all this risks spreading a deadly virus.

“If the people behind ‘Child Abuse Awareness Month’ (also known as ‘Child Abuse Prevention Month’) really want to prevent child abuse then how about campaigning to ameliorate the worst effects of poverty?

“Poverty increases the stress that can lead to actual abuse and, poverty itself often is confused with ‘neglect.’ This can be seen by the fact that study after study shows even small increases in income significantly reduce what child welfare systems call ‘neglect.’

“If only there were a Statistics Abuse Awareness Month,” Wexler said.

Wexler noted that NCCPR has resources for any journalists and others interested in putting all this into context, countering the hype and hysteria and pressing for real solutions.

The National Coalition for Child Protection Reform is a small, nonprofit child advocacy organization that works to make that system better serve America’s most vulnerable children. [Read what other child welfare leaders and journalists say about NCCPR here.](#)

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